The TURNING POINT

LOUIS TRACY

N. A. 1940

very good. *

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BY

LOUIS TRACY

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	A Modern Knight-Errant	1
II.	The Great North Road	16
III.	The Revel	32
IV.	A Refuge	47
V.	An Interlude	64
VI.	Aylmer Breaks Into, and Out of, Society	81
VII.	Moon-Madness	100
VIII.	A Busy Day	119
IX.	Cellini Creates a Sensation	137
X.	An Oxford Street Prelude to the Pageant	153
XI.	Showing How Rosalind Came to Mountford	169
XII.	Wherein Cellini Takes a Hand in the Game	186
XIII.	Good Intentions	206
XIV.	Tightening Bonds	223
XV.	A Crash	241
XVI.	When Greek Meets Greek	256
XVII.	Lights and Shadows	275
XVIII.	Arms and the Man	294
XIX.	The Fight	313
XX.	The End of the Pageant	332
XXI.	New Lamps for Old	352

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CHAPTER I

A MODERN KNIGHT-ERRANT

Sir James Macpherson, K.C.M.G., D.S.O., M.D., a Vice-President of the Royal College of Surgeons, whose scientific honours and distinctions fill many lines of small type in current works of reference, swung round in his chair when the "next case" entered the consulting room. Sir James's manner was somewhat Olympian. He frowned over an open letter in his hand, much as Jove himself might have scowled an inquiry at a cartel brought by some messenger of the gods.

"Flight-Comamnder Richard Aylmer?" he grunted, with Aberdonian rolling of r's, glancing up at the tall, slender young man in a golfing suit who had strolled in unconcernedly.

"Just plain Dickie Aylmer, sir," was the answer. "I'm out of the Army, and out of Hospital, and I am here to oblige Dr. Felix Glen, who said he wanted you to see me."

"Did he, indeed?"

Sir James bent again over the letter. Some phrase in it seemed to placate him. He indicated a chair.

"Weel, I'm glad ye've called, an' that's a fact," he said, his severe features becoming almost benign with a smile of welcome. "I recollect every detail of yer smash. It was a lucky one, or ye wudna be here. Sit ye doon. What can I dae for ye?"

The visitor looked interested.

"Was it you, sir, who mended my roof in the Rawalpindi Hospital?" he asked, seating himself. He used a precision of movement rather at variance with the easy way in which he had entered the room.

"Ay. I tried to. A sad mess they'd med' of ye in the field hospital. But—what else could any puir devil of a surgeon dae while the Boche was shelling the place?"

"I suppose I ought to thank you, Sir James."

"Nay, nay. Dinna fash yersen if it requires an effort."

"Honestly, I would have preferred to die then, falling from the clouds, like Lucifer, Son of the Morning."

"I don't approve your simile. And Lucifer didn't die, unfortunately. He fell 'never to hope again,' whereas you look fit for active service once more, so I am sorry to hear you have sent in your papers."

Macpherson had stiffened slightly—hence a studied absence of the Scottish accent, which, when in evidence, implied geniality.

"That's exactly the point," retorted the other. "Please God, I'll never murder any more of my fellow-men!"

The conversation, brief though it was, had taken an unexpected turn. For some reason, the great doctor was displeased by that last remark. His patient, or visitor, sat opposite a north light which flooded the spacious apartment through two high and broad windows. His keen eyes searched perplexedly a clean-cut, intelligent, and quite healthy-looking face, because the outward indices were far more favourable than might be expected after the emotional outburst he had just heard. He hesitated a moment, and seemed to check the words on his lips.

"I was not quite prepared for such an expression of opinion from a man with your war record," he said.

The comment was meant to soothe rather than invite

controversy. None knew better than this eminent specialist in cerebral disease that sufferers must not be provoked to resentful argument. But the one-time soldier only smiled.

"No doubt you think," he said, "that my peculiar method of downing Huns ought to be preserved for future use? I suppose, sir, you are ready even now to recommend me to the Air Ministry as a lecturer-demonstrator at Cranwell or Halton?"

"Certainly, if I were assured of your complete restoration to health."

"Oh. I'm all right. In fact, my brain is much clearer to-day than during the war. That is why I have chucked the Army. I'm not hard up. I simply refuse to earn any more blood-money, even in the negative form of a wound pension. I want to be free, to breathe the air of civilian life once more, to feel myself purged from the taint of being a licensed slaughterer."

Sir James was undoubtedly puzzled now, perhaps slightly irritated, but his comment was guarded.

"Have you been reading much lately—over-doing things a bit?" he inquired.

Aylmer laughed quite cheerfully. He looked and spoke as though he had not a care in the world.

"I hope you don't suspect that I'm a trifle touched in the top storey?" he grinned.

"Um! Not in the vernacular sense, perhaps. But you had been badly 'touched' there the last time we met."

"That's O.K. now, sir, thanks to you. Just take a peep at my upper works," and the youngster, who could not be a day older than twenty-five, bent forward to exhibit a wealth of brown hair. Such scars as must exist after a terrific operation were well hidden.

Macpherson relaxed a little. He recalled scraps of

gossip as to oddities of language and behaviour which had caused Aylmer to be known among his comrades as "the Singing Poet," and wondered if the remarkable escapades with which he was credited round about Arras in 1918 could be literally true.

"I'm glad tae hear it," he said, with the gruff kindliness which was his true attribute. "What I canna mak' oot is why ye should talk like a bletherin' Bolshevist in Hyde Park."

"But, suppose the soap-box orator suspects you, on your part, of labouring under strange delusions?"

The prompt retort was robbed of any hint of impertinence by a smiling earnestness which bespoke sincerity of thought. Sir James was compelled to reason the matter, even against his will.

"He may," he said drily. "Meanwhile, sensible folk support auld-fashioned ideas of government. But, let us keep to the thing that concerns ye mainly. Why are ye wilfully flingin' awa' all chance of succeedin' in a wonderful profession—at your age, an' all?"

"I have made up my mind never to fly again—as a soldier, at any rate."

"Then, for goodness' sake, man, why are ye here?"

"Merely because Glen wished it. He's a decent sort of chap, and I guessed he wanted you to give me the 'once over' as a queer specimen. Then, again, he thought, perhaps, you would be rather proud of me professionally."

Aylmer rose, and the surgeon's observant eye detected a slight unsteadiness before the youngster stood square on his feet. It was nothing more noteworthy than the awkward effect of a landsman to correct his poise when a yacht at anchor in smooth water yields to the hardly perceptible swell caused by the distant passing of a large vessel.

"D'ye ever feel a sensation of giddiness?" inquired Macpherson, the interest of his craft conquering the pique which had induced the petulant request for an explanation of such self-evident waste of his time.

"Often!" came the flippant answer. "London can be the giddiest spot on earth."

"Weel, weel! Sit ye doon, lad. Sit ye doon. I hae a few minutes tae spare yet. Noo, there's nowt but death which canna be changed for the betther. Let me recommend you for three months' rest in Lady Audrey Bewlay's Officers' Home. It's an ideal place, an'——"

"Look here, sir, I'm fed up with treatment. Something tells me I had best go my own way. And, may I ask, what is really the matter with me?"

Sir James shook his head as Aylmer sank back into the chair.

"Candidly, I don't know," he said. "I can tell you something about the damage you sustained that day in France. . . . Eh, dearie me, how far off it a' seems noo —the bangin' an' the crashin', an' the reek o' bluid an' gas an' deid men an' animals! . . . I begin by assuming that the sensory zone of your brain is of uncommon size and great capacity. You should display marked literary, or musical, or artistic talent——"

"Ah, that's good, that's scientific," broke in his hearer eagerly. "I should be able to paint. That's what I mean to do."

"Were ye a penther afore the war?"

"No; never had brush or palette in my hand. I've spent a few hours recently in a Chelsea studio, and learnt the A. B. C. of it."

"But what were ye? Ye maun hae had a career in mind, even at nineteen?"

"I had planned reading for honours in History at Oxford. I was also a Fabian."

"A what?"

Aylmer chuckled joyously.

"I wish certain people I know could hear you say that, Sir James," he cried. "Fabianism is rather dead nowadays, since its chief apostles took to making money by writing nonsense plays and erotic novels. I was a Socialist, let me say."

"Then why tak' up wi' pentin' noo?"

"How can I tell? Why does a tadpole become a frog?"

Sir James had learnt at last that this slender, graceful youth could display a surprising nimbleness of wit.

"Weel," he growled, after another pause—perhaps his own thoughts demanded concentration—"I havena answered yer question yet. My belief is that the highly complex nerve region I just spoke of is subject to some disturbance—mebbe the intrusion of a foreign body, such as a microscopic bit of bone, or a speck of grit—you fell in a sand-pit, didn't you? The functions of that particular set of nerves are poorly understood. We know certain definite things. All sensation is destroyed by a bi-lateral lesion—in plain English, by injury amounting to derangement of both sides of that part of the brain. Destruction of a single centre will partially or almost totally abolish sensation in the organ it governs on the opposite side of the body. If the hearing nerves are damaged on the right side you will be deaf in the left ear——"

"So, if I used to write rotten poems before I got that crack on the head I may now be impelled to spoil canvas?" broke in the patient eagerly.

Sir James smiled again.

"I'm sorry to have to warn you that the phenomena I have in mind are less liberal in distributing the talents,"

he said. "The result of some morbid excitation of the cortical sensory centres, which supply the anatomical dwelling-place of ideation, is too often a species of hallucination, accompanied by abnormal subjective sensations, such as strange and offensive tastes and smells, and extraordinary flashes of light and colour——"

"Ah! Flashes of light and colour! Admirable!"

For the second time during that somewhat unusual discussion, Sir James showed a little petulance.

"You must not pick up my words in that fashion," he said testily. "I was talking of illusions, not pigments."

"Art is made up of illusions, sir."

"Ye're not goin' tae wheedle me into a discussion, young man, or I micht agree wi' yer defineetion too readily."

"Well, may I assume that my new-born craze for painting is merely an instance of a strange if inoffensive taste?"

The great doctor did not reply at once. For some reason, which he did not trouble to analyse, he liked this good-looking boy, with his bizarre beliefs, unworldly ideals, and real sense of humour.

"There's certainly naething wrang wi' your wuts at this moment," he went on, while sympathy and mere amusement struggled for mastery in his mind. "I wish ye'd be candid wi' me aboot yer symptoms."

"Symptoms! What sort of symptoms?"

"Oh, mental exaltation and depression, day-dreams, fanciful theorising as to the future of humanity—just the kind o' trash ye were reelin' off a few minutes since. And, talking of reeling, why are you afraid of falling when you stand up or sit down?"

"There always was something wrong with my balance, sir, even financially. My army agents once wrote——"

"Ye're a saucy young pup, that's what ye are," vowed

the other emphatically, as he reached for a diary marked "1918," and referred to an index. "So you won't let me send you to Lady Audrey?"

Aylmer leaned forward, with an air of mock earnestness.

"Tell me, sir," he said. "Have you ever met Lady Audrey?"

Sir James had to laugh, though grimly. The Bewlay Home for Shell-shocked Officers was an admirable institution when her ladyship could be kept away from it.

"You know her, then?" he inquired, not quite heeding his words.

"So do you, sir, I take it?"

Too late, the older man saw his error. When he looked at Aylmer again his searching grey eyes were frankly astonished.

"If I could be satisfied your cure was permanent I'd pack you off without a moment's hesitation," he said. "But, just because, as Glen says, I'm interested, I must give you a word of warning. You may come under, or be brought under, the care of some other brain specialist. How is your memory?"

"Fine, sir. I can recite you whole passages from the poets. Do you remember Milton's 'Ode to a Hen'? It begins:

"Oviparous fowl! To thee I pen my lay——"

"D'ye think ye can pu' the leg of a man auld enough tae be yer gran'father?" demanded Macpherson wrathfully. "Now, pay good heed tae what I'm sayin'. I want you to remember a technical sentence. When you crashed, you broke an uncommonly thick heid—skull, I mean—and it's highly probable you also injured not only the upper temporo-sphenoidal lobe but the middle and lower lobes as well. We don't know much about the

functions of those two latter lobes, and it is there, if trouble arises in your case, that the cause may be located, but not treated—that is impossible. Noo, can ye repeat that?"

Aylmer proved himself word-perfect, but the other only sighed.

"All right," he said. "You've beaten me. But, if need be, come and see me again. At any rate, why not dine here one night this week?"

"I'm off to the country this very day, sir."

"The best place for ye. Avoid noise, dissipation, excitement of any kind. And, when ye *are* in London, gie me a call. I shall be delighted tae see ye, as a friend."

"Not half so pleased as I, sir. I think, too, if I had you in your dining-room, at the coffee and cigar stage, I might find you not so wholly opposed to my ridiculous theories as you say you are."

"Be off, ye young scamp! I've wasted a whole half hour over you and yer crazy notions. Ye're still in the clouds, I fancy, but ye'll come back tae earth again wi' anither wallop, or I'm greatly mista'en."

The two shook hands cordially. When the soldier had gone, Sir James wrote something in the diary. So intent was he on his notes that he paid no heed to his waiting patients for fully five minutes. Then, when the entry was completed to his satisfaction, he closed the book.

"A splendid lad gone a bit off his head, I fear," he muttered. "O, that war! That horrible war!"

Soon after leaving the doctor's house Aylmer crossed a small square. It was a glorious June day, and, at that hour, about eleven o'clock, the pavements were empty, and there was hardly any traffic on the roads. Some nursemaids and children, privileged residents in the locality, were playing in the tree-shrouded central garden.

Two little girls, peering through the railings, saw that the tall stranger passing at the moment was hatless.

"Oo, look!" cried one. "Look at the funny man!"

Aylmer winked at her, and she laughed delightedly. Right in front, forgotten by the authorities, and intended at one time to light the garden gate, stood a derelict gas-lamp of late Victorian days.

"Now, watch!" he said, and, with an active spring, he caught the iron arm provided to support the lamp-lighter's ladder. He was a skilled gymnast, and his intent was to amuse the children with a trapeze display for a few seconds, but the bar snapped, and he fell, though so nimbly that the accident looked premeditated.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded.

"More!" said the child. "Do some more!"

A startled nursemaid, however, was not so pleased.

She hurried forward, and snatched her charges out of range of a person who was behaving like a lunatic. She had seen, too, that a policeman was approaching, a fact of which Aylmer was not aware until a severe voice behind him said:

"Now, young fellow, wot's the game?"

Aylmer was examining the strip of iron, but he turned at once with a cheerful grin.

"Isn't it perfectly scandalous, constable," he said, "that some board of podgy councillors should allow an iron lamp-post to become so oxidised by the weather that it breaks like a carrot at the first touch?"

The policeman looked at the crumbling rust of the fracture, and dug his thumbs into his belt.

"Yes, but—" he began.

"It didn't matter to me, of course," went on Aylmer. "I knew how to recover myself. But, even though the streets are lighted from electric standards, suppose some

poor fellow were sent here to remove this obstruction, and rested a ladder against the arm meant for that very purpose? He would fall with a horrible crash, and probably injure himself badly by clinging to the ladder."

"Yes, I know," said the policeman. "But, for all that——"

Aylmer was crumbling bits of the dead metal between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

"Why, the stuff was three parts sand the day it was cast fifty years ago," he went on. "You would be tremendously surprised, wouldn't you, if I hit you over the head with a seeming bar of iron, and it flew to smithereens on your helmet?"

"I certainly would," agreed the policeman. "But if I was you, sir, I'd just put that thing in the gutter, an' not jump at any more old posts. I don't see as how it's a serious affair. The first gale might ha' brought it down."

"Splendid! I have always held that the British policeman is the one sure prop of the Constitution. Now, if you were me, as you said, and you had the world before you, what would you do?"

"Meanin' for the day, sir?"

"Yes. Let us at least be practical."

"Well, first of all, I'd change into more comfortable clothes."

"Excellent. And then?"

"I'd take a 'bus as far as Edgware, an' walk on to Watford, where there's plenty of trees, an' nice gardens, an' no traffic to speak of."

Aylmer looked up at the sky. Some wisps of white cloud were sailing lazily under the blue dome of infinity.

"The wind is sou'-east," he said. "The Edgware Road runs nor'-west."

"That's about the line, sir."

"I'll take it. And now, as between gentlemen and lovers of the open country, since you cannot come with me to Watford, will you have a pleasant evening in London at my expense?"

The astonished policeman pocketed a ten-shilling note, though protesting that he had done nothing to earn such largesse.

"Oh, yes," Aylmer assured him. "A medical big-wig I have just seen could talk of little except sensory zones and temporo-sphenoidal lobes, whereas you, a philosopher of the streets, tell me at once to ramble around Watford. If his advice were worth two guineas yours is cheap at ten bob. May God keep you!"

The policeman's eyes followed the erect, lithe figure as it crossed the square with swinging strides.

"A nice young fellow, if ever there was one," he mused. "Pity he's a bit cracked. The war again, I s'pose. . . . What that dam' war is responsible for!"

Early that afternoon, with a knapsack strapped to his shoulders, and his hands crossed on a stout oak stick, Aylmer was seated on top of an omnibus bound for Edgware. He was passing the flying-ground at Hendon when an aeroplane crossed the road at a dangerously low altitude. It held two occupants, the pilot and a girl passenger. It passed so near that both faces were quite visible. The man looked concerned, as well he might, having cleared some telegraph wires by a very small margin, but the woman's cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkling. Evidently, she was enjoying a novel experience.

"Isn't that machine taking a chance?" inquired Aylmer's nearest neighbour on the 'bus.

"Yes," was the reply. "He's a fool, and needs kicking.

I'll go and do it." Whereupon this modern Don Quixote rose, stopped the vehicle, and got off.

The critic upstairs laughed.

"There's more than one fool in the locality just now," was his comment to a woman who had heard his question and Aylmer's answer. "That 'plane 'll be a mile away in a minute. He'll never see it again."

"I'm not so sure," said the woman. "I don't hear it. It's down now, I think. Anyhow, I hope that young gentleman doesn't get into any trouble. I like his looks."

Meanwhile Aylmer, who had learnt flying at Hendon, knew his exact whereabouts, and was in no doubt as to what was happening to the aeroplane. By taking a short cut and climbing a fence he reached the aviation ground, and saw the machine tilted almost on to its nose, with a broken under-carriage. The pilot was helping the lady to alight. Obviously, neither was hurt. An officer and a few mechanics, who had run out from the distant hangars when a crash seemed imminent, were advancing more leisurely, seeing that a serious accident had been averted.

The airman was explaining matters to his companion, who seemed to be quite unconcerned. As Aylmer came near he caught the words, "a lucky escape from that beastly wire."

He broke in at once.

"A lucky escape from an infernal idiot!" he said, with a look of wrath at the man. "There is not the slightest reason why you should not break your own silly neck, but I cannot understand why you should be allowed to risk the life of any other person."

The aviator was unhooking the strap of his helmet, but desisted in sheer surprise. He gazed at the newcomer with a fine affectation of scorn.

"My good man," he said, "will you mind your own business?"

"My precious ass," said Aylmer, "will you study an elementary text-book on flying before you dare take a machine into the air again?"

The girl stood, with her hands in the pockets of her leather coat, gazing amusedly at the disputants. Her friend had grown white with anger, whereas the stranger was wholly self-possessed. He might have been a schoolmaster remonstrating with a fifth-form delinquent.

By this time, the officer had approached.

"Made a bad landing, Grosmont," he said, clearly wondering why the pilot was in such a rage.

"Yes. I'll explain in a minute. Meanwhile, will you have your men remove this fellow? I'm sure he's trespassing, and he certainly is impudent."

Aylmer laughed.

"You haven't even the sense to know that you're a fool," he said. "Here you have a dandy of a machine, and you don't trouble to learn the first principles of using it. Yet you must have had an instructor, and he certainly told you twenty times that an engine with high compression designed to fly in high altitudes tends to overheat when flown low. You were just showing off before this young lady, and it's a miracle she, at any rate, is alive, because you know perfectly well you were stalled the moment you hopped over those telegraph wires. You pancaked by mere chance. If you hadn't——"

Aylmer cracked a thumb and forefinger with expressive gesture. He turned to the girl.

"Unless you are anxious to die suddenly, never go up with 'Grosmont' again," he said.

For an instant their eyes clashed, and Aylmer felt then

that they had met before, though he had not the ghost of a notion as to when or where.

"Hello!" broke in the officer.

"Cheeri-o, major!" grinned Aylmer. "Please keep me out of it," and he strode off by the way he had come. The others watched him in silence.

"Who is our somewhat candid friend, Major Bellairs?" inquired the girl at last.

"I take it he wishes to remain unknown," said the soldier, "but there is no harm in telling you that he knows what he is talking about. . . . Hard luck, Grosmont! I suppose your engine did really stall?"

Lord Francis Grosmont nodded sulkily. What he desired more than anything else in the world at that moment was freedom to hammer with his fists the quietly contemptuous face of the man who had just vaulted out of sight over a high wooden fence.

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

AYLMER paused irresolutely on regaining the main road. He was in two minds whether or not to return to London for the night. He had a plausible excuse, having come away without canvas or paint-tubes, his artist's outfit consisting only of a small sketching block and a box of water-colours. He was no adept in their use. Like many another novice, he had discovered that it was easy to splurge in oils. With them one can experiment, rub out, superimpose lights on shadows; the more delicate medium demands real knowledge before the brush tints paper irrevocably.

But the true cause of his sudden unease was the sight of the wrecked aeroplane, with its graceful lines, its suggestion of power and movement, temporarily bereft of life by a bungler. A dim consciousness of this fact made him stubborn. Despite his hatred of war he was a born fighter, so he caught a northbound omnibus, which went only as far as Edgware.

Entering a tea-house, he ordered some eggs and a glass of milk. He was awaiting this modest repast when two girls arrived on bicycles, and sat at a table facing him. Apparently, they were on holiday. Each carried a well-stuffed wallet slung over her shoulder, while a bulky package was strapped behind the saddle of each machine. They were nice-looking, discreetly dressed, and demure enough, though Aylmer shared their instant knowledge that all three were flying from London to seek the freedom of the broad highway. He was puzzled for a time by the shape and folds of the parcels on the bicycles, but decided

ultimately that the adventurers meant to sleep in the open, and were carrying *tentes d'abri.*

It was almost a revelation to discover that the new generation of women in England was shedding the bonds of convention so thoroughly. He caught the eye of one —the prettier of the pair, as it happened, and pointed with his pipe.

"I wish I had thought of that," he said affably. "I may do it yet, though it must be rather a weight, and I want to walk, not to ride."

"Have you walked from town?" said the girl, with the ready camaraderie of the Londoner.

"Not a yard."

All three laughed. So little passes as a joke in such conditions.

"I don't see—" she began.

"Oh, I mean tramping all right," he explained. "I have just decided to make for the Great North Road, and walk twenty miles a day for a fortnight."

"We're going to do fifty a day for a week," put in the second girl.

"Then, at the end of a week, you'll be seventy miles farther on than I shall be in a fortnight."

"At the end of a week we shall be back in Oxford Street, reckoning up the total of seven and a half yards of material at two-eleven-three a yard," said the first girl, with a hint of revolt in her tone.

"So now you know we're not duchesses in disguise," tittered her companion.

"You surprise me," said Aylmer gravely. "I took you for countesses, at least. You have all the hall-marks of aristocracy—short upper lips, slender necks, broad foreheads and small hands and feet. Where is the duchess who can show finer points?"

Both girls giggled. A waitress intervened with a laden tray, and a group of chattering Cockneys halted in the doorway. Aylmer soon finished his meal. Passing out, he stood for a moment at the girls' table.

"Get a chemist," he advised, "to give you something smelly which will keep off ants and midges, or they'll plague the lives out of you. *Verbum sap.*, which means 'Take my tip.' Good luck, and a pleasant journey!"

Outside, he boarded a 'bus for St. Albans. In that old-time city he bought a map, and hit on the road to Hitchin as being probably more free from motor-traffic than that to Hatfield. The bookseller assured him there was a comfortable inn at Wheathampstead, so he resolved to walk the five miles, thus making an easy stage of it for the first day.

In half an hour, while skirting Barnard's Heath, he came on a man resting under a tree, and smoking a cigarette. On the ground lay a violin-case. The wayfarer's garments were peculiar. He wore a straw hat with a vivid scarlet band, a brown velvet coat, heavily braided, a light blue shirt, with a soft collar of the same material, a flowing brown silk tie, brown cloth trousers, brown socks, and brown shoes. He was sparse of figure, and tall, judging by the length of his shins. He had a curiously saturnine face, and seemed to be about thirty-five years of age. Aylmer noticed at once that his right hand was thin and long-fingered, with knobby knuckles, but the left hand, encased in a brown kid glove, though equally slender, was much shorter. Beyond a light mackintosh, on which he sat, he revealed no other belongings, not even a stick.

"Good e'en, friend," said the stranger, in a deep, well-modulated voice. "What d'ye lack—inspiration for the muse or subjects for the brush?"

"I have abandoned the groves of Euterpe for the studio of Apelles," said Aylmer, meaning to test this fellow's mettle without delay.

"Good! Let us foregather. I am a slave of Terpsichore. I say 'a slave,' because if I don't serve the goddess I don't eat. Behold in me the champion left-handed fiddler of the world."

Aylmer began to fill his pipe.

"That puzzles me," he said. "If a man holds the fiddle with the left and the bow with the right, does that make him a right-handed fiddler?"

"It is a point for the logicians. But, as the common horde is dexter, I describe myself as sinister." Then he smiled, and the effect was almost startling. Thus might Pan display merriment in the depths of a forest.

"Now that I come to think of it," said Aylmer, who was really interested, "I don't remember ever having seen a violinist use the right hand for the strings, if that is what your words convey."

"Why that needless tag? What other meaning could they have? Whither bound, may I ask? If not in a hurry, which is the bane of every true Bohemian, take a pew," and the mackintosh was widened hospitably.

"I was thinking of going North," explained Aylmer, seating himself.

"The birds have gone there long since, but they are wiser than mere mortals. Do you sing?"

"I—I used to."

"What the devil, man! One should always sing. Why the past tense?"

"I've been ill, and not minded that way." Aylmer did not care to explain that when in the air he would sing until stopped by sheer lack of breath in the higher

altitudes. Always invariably, he would break into "The Death of Nelson" when attacking a Hun.

"What could you sing?"

"Bits out of many operas."

"Know the cantabile from 'Samson et Delilah'?"

"Yes."

The musician reached for his violin case, placed a fine old fiddle across his knees, and proceeded to adjust the bow into the fingers and thumb of his left hand. Then Aylmer realised, with something akin to awe, that the hand was a mechanical one.

"Hello!" he murmured sympathetically. "A souvenir of France?"

"No. Of Turkey. Twelve years ago I was a dragoman in the British Embassy at Constantinople. I studied the domestic life of a distinguished Pasha, and had my hand chopped off at the wrist for hesitating a second too long before dropping from a wall. But that's ancient history. Let's hear you warble."

Tucking the fiddle under his right chin, this strange being drew a few chords, twisted a peg or two, and forthwith dashed into the opening bars of the famous aria.

Aylmer had not sung a stave during many months, nor had he the faintest intention of doing so now, yet, no sooner did the cue for the voice arrive than he broke involuntarily into the passionate lyric:—

> Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix
> Comme s'ouvrent les fleurs
> Aux baisers de l'Aurore. . . .

He was conscious, but agreeably so, of some insistent quality in his companion's playing, a species of urging, which simply compelled the vocal notes to well forth. He believed he had never sung so melodiously before. He had a good tenor voice, and he knew that it blended

exquisitely with the sobbing vibrato of the violin. Then the other chimed in with the baritone part, and they ended triumphantly on a chord of perfect unison.

Aylmer's emotions were so stirred that a slight mist came over his eyes, and the fiddler's eager comment reached his ears faintly, as though from a great distance.

"That was good! That was almost magnificent. Bide with me, friend, and I'll make the fortunes of both of us. What shall I call you?"

"My name is Richard Aylmer," and the mere sound of his own voice helped to revive the younger man's scattered senses.

"A fine name—Norman, baronial—but unnecessarily accurate. For instance, I have modelled myself on Benvenuto Cellini—the most candid rascal who ever lived."

"Very well. Know me, then, as Julius Cæsar."

"Dammit, he couldn't *sing!*"

"Surely he could if he tried. He could do everything he had a mind to."

"All right, Cæsar. The very name evokes a thought. He was the first great man who ever trod the Great North Road. Do you know it—the road, I mean?"

"No."

"All the better. The poetic muse is more spontaneous when unfettered by prosaic fact. Now, I have a nodding acquaintance with each one of its mile-stones, and there's a great lyric in its appeal, but I'm no poet. Give us another taste of your quality, my gay young spark. You say you wrote verses before you soiled clean canvas. Listen! I call this the song of the Telegraph Wire; it's a chant hummed only when the wind blows, and it tells a strange story of humanity's loves and hates. It uses a language of its own, and this is how it speaks to me."

The violin poured forth a weird melody, subdued yet lilting, in a minor key, with more than a hint of the barbaric East—some such siren song as Vathek may have heard in the enchanted halls of Eblis. Soon Aylmer's head was beating time. With an inexplicable degree of haste he opened his knapsack and produced sketching block and pencil. He scribbled rapidly, only pausing occasionally to pick up the cadence.

Then he sang:—

When I was a boy on the Great North Road,
Many a day, as I danced along,
I heard in the drone of an unknown code
Chorus and verse of an endless song.
It seemed to me then that each wire was a string,
Each pole a poet's lyre,
And they breathed the rapture of Youth and Spring—
The Song of the Telegraph Wire.

Hum, hum, fiddle and drum,
Through village and town and shire,
Telling of men as they go and come,
Singing a song over heath and slum—
Hum, hum, fiddle and drum—
The Song of the Telegraph Wire.

"Bravo! bravissimo!" shouted Benvenuto Cellini. "I guessed there was good stuff in you!"

Aylmer, rather in a trance, trolled the next two verses:

My wandering feet led me down the Road;
For ever the Wire sang overhead;
And at last I learnt how to bear the load
Which each man carries until he is dead.
For the one who travels in regal state
A thousand trudge in the mire.
But all can hear, whether lowly or great,
The Song of the Telegraph Wire.

Oh, the Great North Road runs South as well,
  With many a branch to East and West;
And the wires their message to all men tell,
  Of sorrow and joy, of labour and rest;
How some are happy and others are not—
  Rejoicing and anguish dire—
If you listen you'll hear, whatsoe'er your lot,
  The Song of the Telegraph Wire.

In the final chorus the tenor of Julius Cæsar and the baritone of Benvenuto Cellini formed, as the musical critics say, a pleasing and well-balanced combination, with the fiddle rising to unexpected heights in harmonic arpeggios. Both men sang as though their very souls were in the task. They lifted their heads, and their eyes pierced the infinite. Hence, they were profoundly unaware that two girls on bicycles, approaching from the south, had dismounted, and were listening spellbound. They were brought back to earth by one of the girls saying:——

"Well—I never did!"

"How true, my lady of the wheel!" cried Cellini instantly. "Stay with us but a little while, and you shall be rapt to the seventh heaven!"

But Aylmer sprang to his feet, and, having no hat, bowed.

"So we meet again!" he said. "You are late, if you still would cover your fifty miles."

"And what about your twenty?" said she who had envisioned Oxford Street seven days ahead. "We saw you jump on the St. Albans 'bus. You've walked about two."

Aylmer found Cellini standing by his side.

"Introduce me to your friends, Cæsar," said the musician, tucking violin and bow under his left arm.

In the frivolous mood of a midsummer hour Aylmer deemed it impossible to explain that he knew less about the two girls than of the fiddler himself.

"Allow me," he said, "to present to you the illustrious Maestro Signor Benvenuto Cellini."

Oxford Street, however, was quick-witted.

"If you're giving us stage names—" she began.

"Exactly," put in Cellini. "Why mar a perfect evening with actuality? Even Cæsar, 'noblest Roman of them all,' has unbent so far as to write doggerel."

"So you," cried Aylmer, addressing the girl who had spoken, "if not a Duchess, shall be Rosalind, daughter of a Duke. And you," to her companion, "we hail as Celia, her friend and cousin."

Both girls, true to type, were amused but slightly suspicious. Before they could utter a word, Cellini, reading the thought on the open page of each bewildered face, knew that they must be soothed by the language of every-day life, though he affected bombast in every sentence.

"Whither away, fair maids?" he said. "Night and its shadows are falling, and the Forest of Arden is many leagues hence."

They took that point at once.

"We're going to camp on No Man's Land Common," said Celia. "Is it far from here?"

"No, but it is not far enough from London, which is still a resort of cut-purses, jack-thieves, and other base fellows. Be advised by one who knows this realm of England in all its forty-two counties to abide this night in Wheathampstead, where, perchance we all shall find lodging. . . . What say you, Cæsar?"

"I was heading that way when you beguiled me into

song," said Aylmer. "Yet I fear I broke Pegasus's neck in the effort to mate my words with your music."

"You will polish the lines like cameos to-morrow."

"Was that the song you were singing just now?" inquired Rosalind eagerly.

"Yes, written and composed on the spot," said Cellini.

"Oh, it was quite beautiful. I was going to ask you where I could get a copy."

"It will be published after supper to-night," and the violinist waved his right hand like a magician. "Meanwhile, as you, too, are musical, let us have another rehearsal. . . . And, by the way, we may make it profitable."

Hitherto, none of them had detected the approach from the North of a high-powered car, which had slowed to a crawl because of the group in the middle of the road. Now the chauffeur, seeing that no accident had happened, gave them a warning hoot, but Cellini ran forward nimbly, doffed his hat with a flourish, and besought the occupants, two men and a woman, to "patronise the arts."

The sheer impudence of the man, his peculiar attire, and the ultra-respectable appearance of his companions, succeeded where success might have been very remote otherwise. The elder of the men signed to the chauffeur, and the car stopped.

"You've a hell of a nerve to hold us up like this," he said, with a smile which robbed his somewhat robust words of actual censure.

"Nerve, in its extremest form, is appreciated throughout the length and breadth of the great Continent of North America," said Cellini, gripping the violin between his knees, and quickly readjusting the bow to his artificial hand. "But nerve must be backed by performance. It

is up to me to make good, as one might say in little old New York."

Straightway he played the opening bars of "Depuis le jour," from "Louise," and certainly no metropolitan audience ever listened to that charming aria more intently than the seven people in the car and on the road. Aylmer, after being slightly disturbed by his queer acquaintance's attitude towards the girls—a ruffling of his sub-conscious mind curiously enhanced by the name of the common chosen by the cyclists as a camping-ground—found himself yielding again to the almost mesmeric spell of the music. Cellini had a tuneful and flexible voice, but it was his playing that was astonishing. Everyone knows that wrist-work is all-important in producing the properly balanced tone of a violin, but this wizard of a man, though his left arm moved only from the elbow, by tricks hard to detect and far more difficult to execute, drew from the instrument a depth of feeling and exquisite quality of tone which would have been more at home in the environment of the Queen's Hall than in a lonely country lane.

When Cellini made an end he neither received nor seemed to expect any applause. Evidently regarding silence as the surest tribute of appreciation, he turned at once to Aylmer.

"Now, Cæsar," he cried, "sing like a thrush!"

Aylmer did not even try to utter a protest. He still held in his hand the manuscript of his song, and he rendered it, he believed, far better than on the first occasion. He nearly faltered when he heard the girls joining in the chorus, but, not to be outdone, the people in the car sang it after the second verse. Even the chauffeur, a stolid Briton, was swept into the flood.

At its close Cellini tucked away fiddle and bow, and flourished his hat.

"Well, friend from beyond the seas, have we panned out?" he demanded.

"Say," came the answer, after the lady had whispered something, "I want a copy of that composition. It's a new one on me."

"It's a new one on earth. It was born less than fifteen minutes ago beneath yonder Druidic oak."

The motorist took from his breast pocket a used envelope and a five-pound note.

"Send the words and music to that address—is it a deal?" he said. "Of course, I'm no pirate. I'm just buying one copy."

"Sir, if the lady had asked me she would have had it for nothing."

"Fine, but you and your little party can't live on air. May I put a question?"

"About my left hand?"

"Well—yes."

"I gave it to France."

"I thought so. Of course, you played in the ordinary way before?"

"Yes."

"Marvellous. Catch to-morrow's mail if possible. . . . Shove along, George! And if any other son of a gun tries to stop you between here and the Sav-oy, kill him."

The car vanished in a cloud of dust. Cellini held the five-pound note aloft.

"Behold!" he said. "The Wheathampstead inn is ours for the night!"

Rosalind laughed, rather sweetly, Aylmer thought.

"We can't share in your money," she said.

"*My* money! Didn't you see Hiram K. Broadway fork out like the lordly financier that he is?"

"Yes, of course, but——"

"And could I have halted him if your pretty faces were not my warranty? And didn't you pipe up in the chorus? And didn't Cæsar here write the words? Tut, tut! This largesse is common stock, wherewith we shall now purchase a fatted capon and the good wine of France, which is often of a finer *cru* in a village inn than in the marble caravanserais of Piccadilly. . . . Come, let us be footing it! Wheathampstead is still nearly an hour away."

He retrieved the fiddle-case and mackintosh, while the girls exchanged those glances whereby women dispense with the spoken word.

"I suppose it's all right?" murmured Rosalind to Aylmer.

"Thus far I see nothing to mar the end of a perfect day," he said gaily. "Here, signor, ere I forget, let me give you this. You will need it if you transcribe that music to-night," and he held out the manuscript.

"Double it up, and put it in my breast pocket," said Cellini.

"Ah. That reminds me. How many left hands did you possess originally?"

"Sufficient to serve my needs. Don't you know that all middle-aged Americans are arrant Puritans in the presence of their women-folk. . . . Now, Celia, you and I will lead the way, while Cæsar whispers sweet nothings in Rosalind's ear."

It was natural enough that they should pair off in this fashion. At any rate, neither girl was dissatisfied, nor might Aylmer guess that Rosalind had confided to Celia in St. Albans that it was just her usual luck to meet a nice young man and see him disappear for ever five minutes later.

"How odd you should write that song about the Great North Road!" she said. "Dollie and I—I mean Celia and

I"—this with a smile and a quite effective sidelong lifting of her eyes—"are taking it as far as Peterborough. Then we turn off towards Warwick and Stratford-on-Avon."

"I think not," said Aylmer, quite innocently. "Cellini has transformed us into a quartette. If he can wheedle a five-pound note out of the first motorist he meets on the road we ought to have an enjoyable tour at the public expense."

Rosalind thought fit to ignore the suggestion, which covered so much ground that it took her breath away—only metaphorically, however.

"Don't you know him at all?" she inquired.

"I have not set eyes on him before."

"Is he—is he—what shall I say—quite all right?"

"Oh, he's a bit of a *poseur*—his head in the clouds and that sort of thing. But he's undoubtedly a fine musician."

"I've never heard anything like his playing, never. It almost frightens me."

"Ah. What do you mean exactly?"

"It's hard to put it into words. His music is overpowering. One can't resist it. I didn't want to stand there and sing before strangers. At any other time I would have run a mile rather than do it. Isn't there a story about a man playing a flute and leading all the children of a town into a cave, and they were never seen again?"

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin. It's only a weird legend, told in many ways and of many countries. But the point is that the magician first offered and performed honest services, and he wheedled away the youngsters in revenge for not being paid his dues. Now, Cellini is paying us."

"Well, I'm glad *you're* with us, anyhow."

Aylmer was lighting his pipe, so missed the second of those provocative glances.

"It is I who am the fortunate one," he said. "This morning a fool of a doctor—no, I shouldn't say that—Sir James is a decent old boy really—but he tried to persuade me to go into an Officers' Home run by a she-dragon named Lady Audrey Bewlay."

"Oh, *that* fussy old thing!"

"Do you know her, then?"

"I—I've met her several times."

Poor Rosalind regretted now her earlier reference to the shop, but there certainly was no need to drag Oxford Street in again by the scruff of its long and twisted neck.

"Well, Lady Audrey is in Surrey, and here am I in Hertfordshire—all in a summer's day."

"Why did the doctor want you to go to a Home?"

"Because I got my head badly cracked in France."

"Oh, you poor boy! Was it a shell?"

"No, a long drop, from an aeroplane. But I'm trying to forget that."

"And so you shall. Whisper! What's your real name?"

"Richard Aylmer."

"I like it. Mine's Peggy. Never mind the rest of it."

"Sounds Indian. Peggy Never-mind-the-rest-of-it!"

"Now you're teasing me. Well, Peggy Jones, if you must know."

They both laughed. They had been talking much more seriously than the two in front, since Celia was giggling constantly. At the sound of their mirth Cellini turned his head.

"Glad to hear you're alive," he cried. "Wake him up, Rosalind! Your motto is 'Aut Cæsar aut nullus!' "

"What does that mean?" said the girl, catching Aylmer's eye quite confidently this time.

"It's sheer nonsense. Pay no heed to what Cellini says. When he plays, it is different."

They discussed music, of which Rosalind knew something. By some miracle she had picked up the correct pronunciation of the more popular Italian and French operas, and their arias. And so, two by two, the girls walking their bicycles, they entered Wheathampstead, where they found a stout man seated outside a pleasant-looking inn.

"Sir," said Cellini, doffing his hat, and bowing deeply, "if you are the landlord of this fair-seeming hostelry you do honour to the menus provided for your guests."

The stout man rose. His dignity did not permit such bantering by an utter stranger.

"D'ye want rooms?" he inquired.

"Food, kind sir, with wine before, and with, and after. Later, having lifted up our voices in song, we would repose. We travel light, so permit me to prove our good faith," and Cellini tucked the five-pound note into the landlord's waistcoat pocket.

"That's talking!" said the other. "We have two double rooms——"

"Have I erred, then, in guiding you to Wheathampstead?" broke in Cellini, with his satyr-like smile, and waving his right hand collectively to his companions.

Aylmer frowned, Rosalind cast down her eyes, and Celia tittered, but Cellini continued unabashed:——

"Talk to us now of tender fowls, and green peas, and a dish of stewed raspberries with custard compounded of real eggs. Then bring us four small glasses of amber liquid vulgarly known as gin and mixed vermouth, and add thereto the particular brew for which you yourself have a mind. When my tongue is loosened, you and I shall discuss the wines in your cellar."

CHAPTER III

THE REVEL

THAT whiff of doubt, or, it may be, of sheer uncertainty, induced by some of his words, was dispelled at once by the man who could play on these varying temperaments as he could wheedle sweet fantasies from the strings of his fiddle.

"Ladies," he cried, "let one of ripe experience advise that the mixture as prescribed be taken at once. Then, when your docile steeds are stabled, we shall climb to our respective apartments, and there remove the stains of travel, thus giving the good liquor time to course through our veins and whet our appetites."

A serving-maid brought a tray and five glasses, and, indeed, a tot of the potent beverage was grateful, for the afternoon had been sultry and the roads dust-laden. Then the girls disappeared, and the two men also went to their allotted room.

Aylmer wanted to say something, but its precise purport eluded his wits. He wished to strike some sort of bargain with Cellini, to form some pact of fair dealing as between themselves and their youthful companions, yet it was difficult to voice even the semblance of distrust in one who had not only provided a harmless and amusing adventure but whose good-fellowship was so attractive and open-handed. His perplexities were solved for the moment, however, by Cellini's actions. Out of various pockets of the brown velvet coat the fiddler produced a brush and comb, a tooth-brush and paste, shaving materials, and a clean handkerchief. The mackintosh disgorged scarlet silk pyjamas, a

yellow silk shirt and collar, and a pair of brown socks. He had these articles arranged on dressing-table and bed before Aylmer's valise was unstrapped.

"You see I am an old campaigner," he said, with one of his sardonic grins, and evidently gratified by the younger man's surprise. "Behold my equipment for the night and the morrow. At Hitchin station I pick up two bags, and we hie thither, I trust, after a royal breakfast."

Aylmer seized the opening.

"You're a jolly good pal," he said whole-heartedly, "and there is nothing I would enjoy more than a few days' aimless drifting in your company, but we cannot take these girls with us, you know."

"And why not?"

The last thing Aylmer expected was this simple, straight-forward question. It was as though an adversary armed with a light rapier had suddenly lunged at him with a quarter-staff.

"Well," he said, fumbling over the words, "they're young—unsophisticated."

"If they were old and wary would you have spoken to them in some tea-shop at Edgware?"

"Probably not," laughed Aylmer. "My eye was caught by their camping outfit, so——"

"Their tents shall be as cloaks in adversity, if need be. Meanwhile, the little dears are having the time of their lives. Do you realise the drab existence they lead behind their bales of calico and rolls of ribbon? Let be! If they choose to take flight in the morning we'll speed them with a roundelay. For to-night they are dwellers in a world of make-believe. Encourage them. Didn't you hear their fresh young voices trilling in your own song? I tell thee, Cæsar, under my tutelage they will unfold their petals like rosebuds burgeoning in the rays of the sun. Mark, now!"

He threw open the door, and sang the opening line of the sextet from "Floradora":—

"O, tell me, pretty maiden, are there any more at home like you?"

Without missing a beat of the rhythm, came a duet from the girls' room:—

"Kind sir, there are a few, both pretty girls, and proper, too."

"Ha!" cackled Cellini, "without fee or license we have already an item for our evening's programme wherewith to tickle the ears of Wheathampstead's groundlings. But, enough of talk!"

He plunged hand and face into a basin of cold water, and Aylmer was silenced for the time.

The men were downstairs first. Cellini, knowing the village would not yield ice, instructed the landlord as to a quite efficient method of cooling two bottles of champagne by wrapping them in a wet towel and placing the package in a current of air. When the girls appeared it was evident that, camp or no camp, each haversack had yielded a smart blouse, black shoes, and a pair of silk stockings. They revealed an abundance of well-dressed hair. Rosalind's tresses were brown, with glints of gold. Celia's flaxen as the locks of a Saxon princess. Expecting Cellini to pass some comment, they looked a trifle self-conscious, but he, smoking a cigarette, merely eyed them, and remained mute as the Sphinx, so Aylmer, though well aware that the older man was using him as a puppet, felt it incumbent on him to put them at ease.

" 'Both pretty girls, and proper, too,' " he quoted. "I see the true inwardness of that line now."

"We hesitated quite a time about bringing anything really smart," said Rosalind, blushing a little.

"Because we meant to keep absolutely to ourselves," put in Celia.

"So it was I who caused you to break your good resolutions?" said Aylmer.

"No, indeed. How *could* we think that? You and Mr. Cellini have been more than kind. I don't mind admitting I was terrified at the idea of sleeping under a tree, but Peggy—I mean Rosalind—pretended to be so plucky that I simply dared not back out."

"It was certainly a bit of an undertaking for a couple of girls. Not that sleeping in the open air is unpleasant in itself. Indeed, I rather like it. Why not try it first in a garden or an orchard—any enclosed place? You will find someone in every village who will let you do that."

There was a moment of silence, of constraint even. Then the maid came.

"If you please, dinner is ready," she said.

"At last we hear words of wisdom," commented Cellini, and Aylmer felt he had been snubbed again—not without cause, since he had expressed himself awkwardly. Rosalind's sprightliness was quite subdued as she sat at the table. Celia candidly gave her attention to a well-browned fowl, flanked by bursting sausages, which was placed in front of the musician.

"No," he said, "I leave the carving to Cæsar. "It's more in his line, anyway, though unlike his wife, he is not above suspicion."

"His wife!" cried Rosalind sharply. . . . "Are you married, Mr. Aylmer?"

Aylmer laughed. He was searching for the wing joint already.

"Cæsar is reputed to have been able, at one and the same time, to use his ears to listen, his eyes to read, his hand to write, and his tongue to dictate," he said. "But

even Mark Antony never claimed that he could also explain other people's jokes. I refer you to our stock comedian. . . . Will you take a sausage, Celia?"

"The whole tribe of Cæsars is notoriously devoid of the sense of humour," muttered Cellini. "Cæsar's wife was supposed to be 'above suspicion,' which is not true of any woman, but a later commentator blundered grievously when he stated that she was all things to all men. . . . What ho! Without there! Bring wine in goblets!"

Rosalind calmed down, though all this chatter was above her head, and she knew quite well she had not been given a direct answer. But she was young, and hungry, and very much inclined to take romance seriously. She wondered why the landlord poured only a little of the champagne into Cellini's glass yet filled hers to the brim, but brightened visibly when Aylmer, trying to make amends for his earlier *gaucherie,* raised his glass and said to Cellini:—

"Do we sing to-night, signor?"

"We ought to, unless those two bottles are wrongly labelled."

"Then here's to the quartette and its leader!"

"Also to its founder!" responded Cellini instantly.

The toast was honoured. Aylmer, who had never even seen a quicksand, had a curious sensation of being caught in one now. But the mood passed, as the other man led the talk to operatic music, being brimful of quaint stories concerning the well-known singers of the past decade. The girls ate heartily, but took little more than the one glass of champagne apiece. Cellini drank at least a whole bottle, though the only perceptible effects of the wine were that his flow of anecdote quickened and his sallies grew more daring. Aylmer found himself yielding to a mood of abandonment. He sang snatches of verse picked up

from French infantry marching along the *pavé*. The girls, though they did not understand, were intensely interested, and contributed their share of songs and choruses heard in the more recent London *revues*. Together they gave a markedly good reproduction of an American jazz duet. Cellini, unscrewing from his left hand a patent fork which he used for the chicken, snatched at his fiddle and played extraordinary accompaniments which invariably stimulated the others to new and more ambitious efforts. When the coffee and cigarette stage of the meal was reached the four people were on the best of terms with each other and with themselves. Eyes were flashing and lips were eager. The mere passing of a match served as an excuse for touching a hand or a wrist.

It was then nearly nine o'clock, and the deepening twilight was giving the last gloss of beauty to a glorious June day. Whether or not the landlord had been prompted thereto by Cellini, the inn had become a broadcasting station for a wireless message to the inhabitants of the village that a party of talented musicians from London would give an open-air concert that evening, and quite a number of people had gathered, with interest whetted by the harmonious sounds coming through the open windows of the dining-room.

At last Cellini rapped sharply on the table with his iron hand, interrupting an animated talk between Aylmer and Rosalind about nothing in particular, and announced that the concert was now about to begin, whereupon he sketched a programme, which would be opened by the sextet.

"But I don't know the words," said Aylmer.

Cellini tossed the manuscript of the afternoon's composition across the table.

"Scribble them on the back," he said to Rosalind.

With an effort, the girl bent her mind to the task.

"I write an awful scrawl, but I hope you can read it—Dickie," she purred, raising her pretty eyes to Aylmer's after finishing the first half of the lyric.

"Now, I suppose, I shall have to call *you* 'Benny,'" said Celia, with a saucy smile at Cellini.

"Yes, if you whisper it," he answered. The fellow had a bewildering trick of giving the simplest words an apparently unfathomable meaning.

"But our heads would have to be closer together."

"They will be, at the right moment. Else what are such heads as yours and mine made for?"

"I wish you two would stop your nonsense," laughed Rosalind. "I've just written 'madden' instead of 'maiden.'"

"My case is worse," cried Cellini. "I'm suffering from a complex of both words. . . . But, hurry up! Here comes a local squire—perchance, a K.B.E.!"

Turning his head,—he was seated with his back to a window—Aylmer saw a tall, heavily-built, red-faced man, bare-headed and in a dinner jacket, talking to the landlord, who was obviously chanting the praises of his guests.

Cellini rose, and opened the door for Celia, who passed out. He glanced at Rosalind, but she, still busy apparently, looked up and said:— "Don't wait. I'll be with you in a tick."

No sooner had the violinist gone than the girl seized Aylmer's arm.

"Tell me," she exclaimed, with a tragic vehemence strangely out of tune with her previous air of light raillery, "are you really married?"

"No," he answered, somewhat startled by her manner, "nor am I likely to be."

"Why?"

"I don't imagine the girl exists who would care to assume the burthen."

"What burthen?"

"Of having a man on her hands who may go stark, staring mad at any minute. That is practically what the doctor told me this morning."

"What rot!" said Rosalind, but she smiled contentedly, and her eyes shone like twin stars. She stood up, and Aylmer stooped to move her chair, as the space between table and wall was cramped. For an instant they were close together in an angle of the room, and screened from observation from either the passage or the windows.

"Do you know," she murmured, raising her face alluringly, "I am having a most wonderful time, all through you. . . . Well, just one, if you'll promise to be good!"

Their lips met. Aylmer realised, a second too late, that he had not meant to kiss her. He was no anchorite, but he held honour dear, and deemed it contrary to honour that he should let this impressionable girl believe that his feelings towards her warranted such dalliance after a few hours' acquaintance.

"I suppose there's no harm in a kiss," he said, clutching wildly at the first excuse that offered.

"I should hope not, indeed. You didn't think so when you were flirting with the French girls, I'm sure."

"I have never flirted with any girl, French or English, and it's rather late to start now."

"You always say the most unexpected things, but I think I like them," and Rosalind sped away, probably to tone down the ardour of her cheeks before appearing in public.

The inn had set four chairs for them under a swinging sign. When they came out there was a buzz of anticipation from the crowd, some forty people, all told. Some-

what apart from the rest stood the man in evening dress, who had been joined by two ladies. These latter eyed Rosalind and Celia in the critical, slightly depreciatory way which Britons of the higher social order affect towards strolling musicians and the like. Are they not yet rogues and vagabonds by statute?

The girls were shy, and more than ready to yield to stage fright. Aylmer was convinced that, wholly against his will, he was making an ass of himself. He was certain his voice would crack on the first note. Cellini smiled at them and at the audience, most of whom were gaping open-mouthed at his manipulation of the fingers and thumb of the gloved left hand when they closed on the shank of the bow.

"*Messieurs et mesdames,*" he began, with a comprehensive wave of the violin, "this small company of wandering minstrels will now endeavour to entertain you with music and song. Let me introduce to you the Ladies Rosalind and Celia, who are on their way to the Forest of Arden, and the Illustrious Caius Julius Cæsar, who wishes to tread again the road he built two thousand years ago. As for myself, I am told I resemble, in face and figure and love of the arts, that immortal worker in precious metals, Benvenuto Cellini, though he created marvels in gold and silver and bronze, whereas I have to depend on an iron hand, having discarded its predecessor in the trenches of Picardy. If we entertain you, we hope to eat and sleep at your expense. If not, there is no compulsion on you or on us to foregather for many minutes."

At once, without any premonitory hint to his companions, he broke away from the arrangement made in the inn, and the violin sobbed the tender introductory bars of Braga's "Serenata." As though they had rehearsed the piece a hundred times in public, the two girls

and Aylmer stood up and took the vocal parts, yet they had only hummed snatches of this difficult, if beautiful, composition during dinner.

The magician was sure of his power. The bow was his wand, the fiddle an obedient siren. They sang marvellously well, and in perfect tune. At the end some excited yokel shouted "'Ear, 'ear!" and clapped his hands, whereupon he was bidden angrily to "shut up!" Cellini grinned an acknowledgment to both the interrupter and those who chided him.

With hardly any delay he dashed into the sextet, which all four rendered with much spirit. Cellini himself seemed to enjoy it.

"Allegretto, con brio!" he hissed, as they neared the end, and, if the girls did not understand, the fiddle translated.

This time, under the sway of a popular melody admirably rendered, the crowd could not resist a tribute of sustained applause, but again there was a hushed breathlessness when Cellini hypnotised their senses with Gounod's "Ave Maria!"

"And now," he cried, with a fine flourish of the fiddle, "this is where every robin may sing. You'll soon pick up the words. Listen to the tune of the chorus—" whereupon the refrain hummed by the telegraph wires warned Aylmer that his ordeal was at hand. But, from the outset, all trace of nervousness had gone from him. He gave the song with admirable restraint, having an intuitive confidence that he could enhance its sentiment by artistic modulation as well as by musical stress.

And the audience sang, too! The man whom Cellini had dubbed a K.B.E., the two scornful ladies, every person there who dared utter a note, each and all took part.

The final chorus brought another score of people hurrying from distant houses.

"That, ladies and gentlemen, concludes the first part of the programme," cried Cellini, when the storm of approbation had died down. "It is for you to say if we shall continue."

He reached for the red-banded straw hat, which hung on the back of his chair, and handed it to Celia, whom he had instructed already as to her procedure. She began at the left of the semicircle, and collected nearly four pounds, "K.B.E." producing a pound note.

Cellini was well content. Such a yield, at a village concert in aid of the Church Organ Fund, would have demanded a month's devising.

"Those who came late may wish to mark their appreciation of the somewhat more modern selection which will follow," he said. "I hope that you others, who have told us in the eloquent language of printed and minted money that we have pleased you, will not feel called on to contribute a second time."

There followed a medley of Béranger's songs, French military chants, bits from the current musical comedies and *revues,* the jazz duet by Mademoiselles Rosalind and Celia, and some really thrilling violin selections from Sarasate, Saint-Saëns and Kubelik. At a few minutes before ten o'clock the village of Wheathampstead was the richer by a memory of some good and weird music and the Wandering Minstrels by over six pounds.

K. B. E. bustled forward.

"If you people care to remain until to-morrow evening," he said, "I'll be glad to have you dine at my place, and meet a few friends. Of course, I'll make it worth your while, and the concert need not end at this early hour."

He addressed Cellini, but had a roving eye for Rosa-

lind, who stiffened perceptibly. For some reason known only to himself, the violinist did not close at once with the unexpected offer.

"We appreciate the compliment," he said. "May we leave a decision till the morning?"

"Yes, but I must know early, so that I may gather my other guests."

The big man was disappointed, yet made the best of it.

"I think we just have time for a drink," he went on genially. "I'm sure you and your admirable fellow-artists are fatigued after such an exacting performance, and out of doors, too."

But Rosalind had whispered already to Aylmer that she was going into the garden at the back of the inn. Celia, thinking, perhaps, that the best way to disperse the crowd was that its entertainers should vanish, went with them. Cellini found them there many minutes later. They were grouped in the centre of a tiny lawn bordered by rose-bushes laden with blooms that were giving forth to the night a wealth of fragrance.

No one was speaking. Aylmer was lighting his pipe with affected nonchalance. Cellini's keen eyes, by no means blurred by two hastily swallowed glasses of brandy and soda, detected that Celia was sulky and Rosalind on the verge of tears.

"Ho-la!" he cried. "What is it now? Reaction—or what?"

"I fear I am the culprit," said Aylmer.

"Nothing new in that. What's up?"

"Only that I must cut myself adrift from this most agreeable party. I have not been myself all day. You do not know, of course, that not many hours ago I was a mental case in a military hospital. I had a bad crash in France, and it undoubtedly affected my brain. To-

day's experience has warned me that music, especially rhythm, affects me dangerously. . . . I'm sorry—more than sorry, Rosalind, but you would not have me crack up for good, merely for the sake of another day of Bohemianism."

"Too bad, I call it," vowed Celia, and her tone was by no means sympathetic. "If you go, we all go, and we *were* having a glorious time."

"Wu-wu-won't you sit down, and talk it over," gulped Rosalind, careless now who witnessed her distress.

"Exactly," put in Cellini, with suave and silky voice. "Aren't we rather jumping at conclusions? Darkness brings strange phantoms to the o'erburdened mind.

> The night has a thousand eyes,
> And the day but one.

Let us ban these distressing visions till the sun peers at them, and perchance they will fly before his cheerful glance. Come, Celia. Let Rosalind charm away poor Cæsar's vapours. I would only have her remember that Venus smiles not in a house of tears."

But Celia, alarmed and greatly distressed by a certain air of finality in Aylmer—fearful, too, lest her friend's pleading might only harden Aylmer's resolution, since she sensed that he was in a strange mood—arrived at the very decision which the clear and active brain of the born Londoner would surely dictate.

"I think," she said slowly, and choosing each word with care, "that we are all rather tired after an extraordinary day. I know I am. Come, Rosalind. Let's be off to bed. Mr.—Mr. Cæsar will not run away before breakfast. Good-night, you two. Whatever happens, I'll never forget our meeting and what came of it. We may

have been crazy, but it will be a long time before I feel happy in Oxford Street again."

Which was well said, inasmuch as it not only ended a distressing scene but greatly surprised one, at least, of her hearers. Could she have seen the scowl on Cellini's face she might have realised that she had not only spoken but chosen wisely.

Rosalind raised no protest. She knew, only too well, that a vivid day-dream had fled into the misty realm of what might have been. Whether it would ever be replaced by a more enduring one time alone would show.

"The devil take all bloated plutocrats!" growled Cellini, as the white blouses were swallowed up by the doorway of the inn. "If I hadn't hobnobbed with that gilded oaf, this wouldn't have happened."

"It is hardly fair to blame anyone," said Aylmer. "I did not join your frolic quite willingly. But I cannot explain myself further. The mere effort hurts. I felt I owed some apology, some reason, to those two girls, and I gave it. There is nothing more to be said. I may seem to be talking calmly, but my head reels. In fact, if I don't reach my room quickly I shall collapse where I stand."

Even Cellini, warped genius and complete cynic though he was, could not help noticing in the semi-darkness that the younger man staggered as he crossed the lawn. He made after him, and grasped his arm.

"Come," he said cheerfully enough, since he was not one who cried over spilt milk. "Let us mount the stairs together. 'Tis a pity. There will be a moon in half an hour, and you know what happened when Marguerite threw wide her casement and told her love to the moon. Ah, me! Would Caius Julius and Benvenuto have behaved thus? Would I, last night? Will I ever again, any

other night? Good youth, thou hast bewitched me, else would I go straight now and challenge that sturdy landlord to a drink-fest."

Aylmer was really ill. He could only undress partly before flinging himself on a bed. For a few minutes he was semi-delirious, and believed that he was flying into a gorgeous sunset which tinted with rose and gold and heliotrope a world-wide carpet of cloud. Then came a pall of darkness—he had rushed into a thunderstorm. When he regained his senses his bewildered eyes fell on Cellini, attired in the red silk pyjamas, and unfastening the straps which bound the artificial hand to his left forearm.

"Ha, ha! Mefistofeles!" he cried, little knowing what he was saying.

"Ho, ho! Sir Galahad! Your wits have returned, then? A minute ago you were raving about some pestilential Boche coming between you and a glimpse of fairyland."

"Was I? I hope I won't disturb you with ugly dreams."

"No fear of that. I can read your symptoms. When you close your eyes you'll slumber like the Seven Sleepers of the Koran, to say nothing of their dog, Kratim, which is one of the ten animals admitted into the Mahomedan Paradise. Do you know the story? It is denied by some, copied by others, but vouched for on the undeniable authority of Al Beidâwi. He probably owned the dog, which was some pup, and far more intelligent than Balaam's ass. . . . What? Off already? And I'll wager my beautiful Strad against a tin whistle that poor Rosalind is lying wide-eyed and fretful. As for Celia— Well, well, 'tis a mad world, my masters. Let's see what hap the morrow brings!"

CHAPTER IV

A REFUGE

AYLMER was utterly exhausted, but it was his nervous system, not his splendid physique, which had given out. The vagaries of those same nerves, so vital to the body's well-being, are so little understood that science, only a few years ago, connived at the shooting, for cowardice in front of the enemy, of many a hapless soldier actually a victim of shell-shock.

It was, therefore, by the action of some obscure process of Nature's alchemy that he awoke at sunrise wholly refreshed in mind and body. Being a skilled observer of the sun's angles, he knew without looking at his watch that the hour was four o'clock. For a few seconds he was surprised at finding himself almost fully dressed, since he had only thrown off coat and waistcoat and removed his shoes before falling on to the bed less than six hours previously. But, to his great joy, he was quite sane once more, and proceeded to demonstrate the fact without delay.

A glance revealed the scarlet figure of Cellini curled up on the counterpane, as the warm June night had called for little or no covering. On a dressing-table rested the brown-gloved artificial hand, with its leather socket and straps. A shaft of sunlight peeping through a chink in the blind fell on it, and Aylmer perceived now, for the first time, a series of screws in the wrist which controlled the finger joints, making them rigid or flexible at will. He had little experience of that side of the war's aftermath, but could not remember having even heard of any such contrivance. It was not a far-fetched notion that the erratic musician had devised the mechanism for his own

use, without ever giving a thought to its possible service to others similarly disabled.

Aylmer rose stealthily, and gathered his belongings. While putting on his coat he became aware of the manuscript of the song in one of the pockets, and this he placed on the violin case. Then, carrying his shoes, he opened the door and halted for a moment on the landing. A bathroom faced him, and the thought of a splash in cold water was tantalising. He did, however, take a chance in unstrapping his knapsack, and scribbling a few lines on the sketch-block.

They were "To Rosalind, from Cæsar," and ran: "I count on your forgiveness and sympathy. You are a dear girl, and I hope life has much happiness in store for you. If I may venture to give advice, Celia and you should continue your tour. You will enjoy it all the more because of its unconventional beginning."

Heedless of the superscription, he signed his name in full. Then he folded the document and pushed it under the door of the room which he knew the girls occupied. Creeping downstairs he met an astonished fox-terrier, who, marvellous to relate, did not raise the house, but, glad of human companionship, trotted gaily in front of him towards the kitchen. A hasty search in the larder brought to light bread, butter, and a jug of milk. The dog was rewarded with a full saucer, and he well deserved it, since Aylmer desired neither explanation nor argument that morning. After a brief meal, he unlocked the back door, and soon was striding along the road to Hitchin. Shortly before five o'clock he was overtaken by a butcher's boy conveying two calves in a light cart. A brief discussion of ways and means led to his entering Hitchin with the calves at half past six. Here he found a hotel with signs of life, and there was no difficulty in arranging for a bath and

breakfast. On his way to the station subsequently he bought a soft felt hat, and had his knapsack tied up in brown paper, for he was candidly afraid of Cellini, and feared the man might track him out of sheer devilment. From Hitchin he took a ticket to Peterborough, and there he caught the Scotch express to York. Thus, in a few hours, he placed one hundred and fifty miles of the Great North Road between himself and the other members of the troupe of Wandering Minstrels.

At times his thoughts would dwell unbidden on Rosalind, and he could feel yet on his lips the tender thrill of that kiss, but he fought against these seductive memories by forcing himself to read a newspaper. Once in York, however, gazing at the incomparable Minster, which he had never before seen, or sauntering through the city's ancient streets, where the people seemed so ridiculously modern to be living in fifteenth-century houses, and the sharp outlines of adventures in Wheathampstead began to blur.

He went to bed early that night, and was on the road at nine next morning. The weather was gloriously fine—indeed, neither he nor anyone else, least of all any meteorological expert, could guess then that the British climate had embarked already on a frantic effort to emulate a tropical summer. But the whirling motorists conquered him by oil-reek and dust during the sixteen miles' tramp to Thirsk.

Greatly daring, on the principle that lightning seldom or never strikes twice in the same place, he again went to a stationer's, again bought a map, and again sought counsel as to the lie of the land.

He was lucky in discovering a man who was a walker, and hated motorcars.

"I thank Heaven I lived thirty years before the

wretched things were invented," said this new friend. "Our lovely valleys were then haunts of peace and beauty. Now every road is scoured by noisy demons, goggled and befurred, whose sole objects in life seem to be the annihilation of distance and the incurring of frightful peril to their own lives and the lives of others. Aeroplanes, too, are birds of ill omen. I refuse to accept them as beneficial to humanity. Look at the toll of human life both classes of machines take, and will continue to take, until they are restricted by outraged public opinion to their proper spheres, which certainly are not roads bordered with honeysuckle and wild roses or skies above populous districts. . . . Well, well. Pardon the maunderings of a crotchety old man, who will die firm in the belief that he is leaving a less happy world than the one he was born in"

"The mantle of Ruskin has been transferred from Coniston to Thirsk," smiled Aylmer.

"Ah, Ruskin! There was a lover of God's green earth, if you like! And who reads him nowadays? Not one in a million. I have no means of ascertaining the figures, but I should be surprised if told that forty copies of 'Sesame and Lilies,' to say nothing of 'Stones of Venice,' were sold in England last year. But I've gone a long way from what you asked me, just because your search for motorless roads revealed a kindred spirit."

Then the enthusiast told of the purple moors and hidden dales of the North Riding, covering all the land from Ampleforth and Helmsley to Bilsdale and Farndale, Rievaulx, Danby and Goathland. Here were roads in plenty where the motorist seldom ventured, not because he quite obviously risked his neck, but might damage what he prized more, a new season's car. He spoke, too, of Coxwold, where Lawrence Sterne wrote "Tristram Shandy,"

and of the house in Kirbymoorside—where Charles Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, after scandalising Europe by his profligacy, died in ignominious poverty—of Lastingham Church, and Pickering Castle, of Whitby Abbey, the tumuli of ancient British Chiefs, and old Roman roads.

Aylmer broke in there.

"Did Cæsar ever visit this part of England?" he asked idly.

"It is believed not. His two campaigns were fought in the south. Cæsar's ghost would be more at home in the neighbourhood of St. Albans, or Verulam, as he might know it."

Aylmer nearly showed his astonishment by a startled exclamation. Could this grey-haired worshipper of nature have some canker of Cellini in him? But he realised instantly that he had been given a quite reasonable answer to a rather aimless question.

"Where would you advise me to strike off?" he said.

"Have you come far to-day?"

"From York."

"Then take train for Northallerton, stay there to-night, and after breakfast to-morrow head for Osmotherlay, where a British King lies buried—hence the name, Oswald by his mother lay. Then turn east-south-east, and you cannot go wrong. Roam where you will, you will find beauty and with it peace. I only wish I might tramp by your side."

And thus it chanced, after nearly a fortnight's joyous ramble, that one sunlit evening in July, Aylmer looked across a pastoral valley at the ruins of a Norman castle. It must have been a valiant stronghold in the Middle Ages. Its battlements both climbed and crowned a steep promontory of limestone rock around whose base flowed a stream which through many a century had hesitated

between the placid dignity of a river and the turbulence of a moorland beck. A cosy and compact red-roofed town clustered in the meadow-land to the northeast before the river turned in toward the castle's gate. Between town and fortress ran a main road which crossed the stream by a curved stone bridge of two arches. The rough moorland track on which Aylmer stood joined this road at the foot of the hill. The massive donjon keep, still intact, dominated the third tier of the fortifications, and its courtyard was almost exactly level with Aylmer's eyes. Of course, the whole of the castle was in a hopeless position once artillery came to plague the earth with its power of killing at a long distance, but never was lordly residence better placed for magnificence of effect and dominance of a countryside in the days when men rode forth to battle with lances and crossbows, and a knight's sword was still his most trusty weapon.

But Aylmer was quickly aware of a new sensation. Though he had never before visited Yorkshire, his native county being Somerset, this picturesque landscape was oddly familiar in his eyes, while some sense that resembled yet could not be memory began to fill in invisible details. Surely there used to be a ford where the bridge spanned the river, with a tiny chapel of St. Mary on the further side? Again, the site of a charming gabled house was once occupied by a tannery, whose strong scents so annoyed the castle-folk when the wind was in the nor'-west that only the exceeding utility of leather prevented more than one haughty baron from razing the evil-smelling building to the ground.

Aylmer's desultory scientific reading had taught him that this delusion of prior knowledge of unknown places was a simple physical phenomenon, due to unconscious cerebration of visual impressions received before the

remaining faculties played their parts. Anyone who had ever tried to picture mediæval England to the mind's eye knew that every important ford in the country had its titulary saint and votive shrine, while, as for the transformation of a tanyard into a modern residence, he saw now that an array of snow-white linen set forth to dry gave a dappled effect to brick walls and hedges of privet. Moreover, he should not encourage these chimeras. Hitching the shoulder-straps of his knapsack into new grooves, he quoted Monsieur Coué's most excellent maxim:—

"Day by day, and in every way, I am getting better and better." In effect, he must stop this too ready trick of romancing.

Then he strode down the hill.

Yet, for some inexplicable reason, which he did not even try to analyse, he was not in the least perturbed, on entering the main road some fifty yards short of the bridge, to come upon a jolly-looking fellow in fifteenth-century costume, riding a white palfrey, and accompanied by a tall knight in full armour, mounted on a gigantic bay horse, while a lithe blue greyhound formed, as it were, an advance guard.

The hack was as gaily caparisoned as his master. Indeed, each wore the same colours. The stockily-built rider was decked in a blue tunic and grey woollen tights, with buff leather jacket, gauntlets, and loose-fitting thigh boots, while his jaunty cap of crimson velvet sported a rakish plume of cock's feathers. The cob's headstall and bridle were of broad bands of the same leather externally, bearing a curious raised pattern in blue and crimson wools, and the saddle-cloth was of blue fringed with crimson tassels. The rider wore a long sword supported from his right shoulder by a baldrick ornamented in keeping with

the palfrey's trappings, and the handle of a wicked-looking dagger showed above a sheath attached to his belt on the right side.

But the big knight and his charger were cased in burnished metal from the top of a fearsome casque to the animal's knees and hocks. The two glistened in the rays of the setting sun, and the warrior's face, for his visor was raised, was hawk-nosed and stern-lipped enough to warrant belief in his Norman lineage.

"Good e'en, my valiant gentlemen!" said Aylmer readily. "You, Sir John, are bound, I take it, for the Castle of the de Montforts?"

"By gum!" cried the short man, "I mun hae't reet togs on, or t'first chap I meet on't roäd wouldn't ken me neäm."

"Who would not recognise Sir John Froissart, chronicler of chivalry in Flanders, France and England? But, who, may I ask, is the worthy Knight?"

"Sir Hugh Calverley," replied the man in armour.

"Are not both of you somewhat far a-field?"

The stout man laughed jovially. In manner and appearance, at least, he did credit to the repute of the famous Fleming, who has told the world for all time that his ears quickened at the sound of uncorking a wine-flask, while he "took great pleasure in fair array and in delicate and fresh eates."

"T'folk roound here were fair crazed te hev' a Pageant o' Montfort," he said, pronouncing the French name correctly, despite his use of the Yorkshire dialect, "an' I reckon we've gotten some queer fish i' t' net. We run frae ancient Britons i' skins, an' Agricola i' gowd armour, tiv' Dick Turpin on Black Bess an' Captain Cook i' knee breeches."

"Do you know this part of the country?" inquired the Knight.

"I do, in a sense," said Aylmer, by no means giving heed to his words. "But the Castle is now in ruins, and the hamlet of Thornythwaite has grown into a goodly town quite beyond my ken."

"By gum!" cried Sir John again.

He was so taken aback at hearing Mountford called by a Saxon name familiar only to antiquaries that he checked his cob needlessly. The animal, usually quiet as a fat sheep, had been eyeing his resplendent companion suspiciously during many minutes, and was convinced now that his doubts were well founded. He struck the road with all four feet in a nervous spring, and by so doing disturbed the big horse, who had his own uncertainties as to what this strange gear portended. Thereupon, he, too, indulged in a perfectly genuine demi-curvet, and he and his master rattled like a wagon-load of empty milk cans.

A good deal of "woa"ing, "Steady, boys," even stronger words, produced some degree of calmness, but Sir John's cheeks were russet-hued before he dared relax the grip of his knees.

"Soom on us 'll brek our damned necks afore this foolishness is overed," he grumbled. "I dëant bleäme t'poor 'osses. Gosh! There'll be a rare to do when t' Tournament begins. Thank the Lord, I'm not in't!"

By this time Aylmer's faculties were nearly normal again. At any rate, he was momentarily sensible of the folly of his random utterances.

"When does the Pageant take place?" he said.

Sir John was flustered, so Sir Hugh answered.

"During the first week in August. On the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday we give our show each afternoon in the meadows yonder—that field near the wood, where you see timber stacked for the stands—and on the

Friday we hold a mêlée Tournament in the same place."

"Have you a rehearsal to-night?"

"No. We want to get used to our clothes and accoutrements, while the horses, as you see, will need some training."

"But the jousts used to be held on a strip of level land in front of the Castle?"

"True enough. The road bisects it now."

"I'll tell thee what, ma bonny man," broke in Froissart sharply. "I wish thoo wadn't talk as if thoo'd bin born i't' reign o' King Richard t' First. Thornythwaite, indeed! It fair upset poor owd Prince, it did," and he patted the white's neck encouragingly.

"Don't you make use of the Castle in any way?" persisted Aylmer.

"The second gate and its towers have fallen, and a fine oak has grown in the centre of the lowest court-yard," explained Sir Hugh, "so the old place will figure only as a gathering-ground for certain historic processions, while others will end there. You see, we expect to have thousands of spectators. If you are hereabouts in August you will find our Pageant highly interesting, while I can assure you the libretto has been written by people who know what they are doing."

"Why should I go elsewhere?" said Aylmer simply. "I have never before set eyes on Montfort, yet I seem to know the place, and am strangely attached to it already. Yes, I shall stay here, and see your Pageant—perhaps paint some of its scenes. Can either of you gentleman recommend me to a comfortable inn?"

"What atween t' season an' this exthry whirligig, evr'y hole an' corner i't' toon is bespoke for weeks," said Froissart. "But I'll gie thee a tip. Owd Bob Jackson, t' caretakker o't' Castle itself, tellt me yesterday that his

lordship hez allooed him te let a couple o' rooms i't' Main Guard this summer. Owd Bob 'll hev' an advertisement i't' paper this week-end, but happen you'll get ahead o't' rush if ye gan there noo."

"I'm exceedingly obliged to you," cried Aylmer joyfully. "That would be the very thing. . . . *Au revoir,* my gallant chevaliers. I hope to meet you again many times."

At the moment they were abreast of a gate leading to the ruin, so Aylmer hurried on his quest.

"Noo. I wunner whëa that chap'll be," said the stout man, as the two continued along the road.

"At first," said the Knight, "I thought he was a writer, but evidently he is an artist, commissioned to send sketches to one of the newspapers. Perhaps a little of both."

"Is he a bit daft?"

"Not he. He has read up the history of Montfort, and tried his 'prentice hand on us."

"Dang me, it didn't soond like that," commented the other. "Ya (one) minnit he said he was well acquent wi' t' plëace, an' t' next that he knew nowt aboot it. . . . Hello! Agricola's i' trouble wi' that rat-tailed hunter of his. By gum, he's off, an' all! Let's tak' a chance, an' push on. It'll be worth a quid to hear t' Colonel swëar!"

And, indeed, the remarks of a gold-plated figure then struggling to its feet from the turf of the Pageant field were likely to be those of a connoisseur, for the glowing armour contained the bruised body and wrathful spirit of an ex-Colonel of dragoons. A loose-fitting helmet had been jammed over his face by the fall, so his tongue had to be freed by a pair of pliers. Then, when the power of speech was restored, he gazed frenziedly around for the man who had advised the addition of a "switch" to the

hunter's abbreviated tail, since this unexpected growth had caused all the excitement.

Meanwhile, Aylmer was following a slightly embanked carriage-road to the Castle. He knew quite well that this was the remains of a causeway ending in a draw-bridge over a wide and deep moat long since filled in, but he resolved to ignore such conceits, which could spring only from some small store of a reader's knowledge as to the conditions of life in the Middle Ages. Still, he smiled somewhat wistfully when he saw in two slits in the massive walls the remains of the apparatus for raising the bridge, and caught a glimpse of the rusted teeth of a portcullis high in the recessed arch.

A wicket cut through a great oaken door studded throughout with iron bosses bore the printed legend: "Admission, on week-days only, between 10 a. m. and 4 p. m." Nevertheless, he rang a bell, which clanged cheerily within, and, after a brief delay, the wicket opened, and an elderly man peered out.

"Mr. Jackson?" said Aylmer.

"Ay, sir."

"Sir John Froissart told me you might have rooms to let here."

"Sir John who?"

"Froissart."

The old caretaker's face lost its air of puzzlement.

"Ay, they'll be havin' all sorts of strange folk up at the Lodge nowadays," he agreed.

"But I mean the man who plays the part of Sir John in the Pageant. He's a thickset, jolly-looking fellow of about thirty—a farmer, I imagine—and he rides a white pony named Prince."

"Why, you'll be talkin' o' Tommy Trenholme! Ay, to be sure. . . . Yes, sir. We have two rooms. They're

not very grand, but comfortable enough, and, if it's quiet you're wantin', you won't hear a sound from one end of the twenty-four hours to the other."

"Are they reached by the stone stairs on the left of the Main Guard?"

"Yes, sir. You'll ha' bin here before?"

"No. I'm a stranger.

"Dash! I don't remember tellin' Tommy— Nay, my wits are wool-gatherin'. He knows Montfort as well as I do. But, come in, sir. Mind you don't slip on the stones. They've been worn smooth by a good many generations of feet, and will see almost as many more, I'm thinkin', if, as they say, the Historical Monuments Association takes the Castle in hand."

From the depths of a vaulted arch—its natural gloom deepened by the closed door—Aylmer looked on to a smooth carpet of turf, a court once flanked on all four sides by thick walls with machicolated towers. The utter ruin of the farther wall was almost hidden by a magnificent oak, now in full leaf. Sheltered from the storms of three centuries, it had attained its full growth unchecked by the chilling nor'-easter. Around its massive trunk ran a most inviting rustic seat, arranged as an octagon.

On the left, or due north, time and hard weather had dismantled two of the small towers, with such inner structures as might have existed there, but the tremendous building was almost intact on the south; here curtained windows and flowers in boxes supported on brackets, for there were no sills, betokened habitation. The great tree shut off from view the whole of the upper parts of the Castle.

"By the way," said Aylmer, "at one time this courtyard was paved, I think?"

"Ay, so I've heard tell. Folk will have it that some

of the flags (large, flat paving-stones) are to be seen to this day in front of the court-house, which was built in 1610."

Jackson's answer was to the point, but Aylmer did not fail to note the old man's scrutinising glance, so he repressed the reminiscences, or curiously accurate impressions, whichever they might be, which were crowding in on him with each onward pace. Hence, he passed no comment when he entered the great guard-room, doorless and windowless, now given over to the storage of coal, firewood, some carved stone effigies, and a dozen fowls in a wire-screened pen.

"Mind the steps, sir; they're badly cut away," said the guide, leading the way to a wide stone staircase with a heavy balustrade. "This is where the men-at-arms gathered when it was their turn for the watch. We're now going to the room set apart for the officers of the guard. The other smaller rooms, where the missus and I live, were the apartments of the seneschal, who was a sort of house-steward in those days."

"And you are his lineal descendant," laughed Aylmer.

"I suppose so, sir. It comes natural. I was sergeant of the officers' mess in my battalion for ten years. His lordship and I joined the 19th on the same day, marched from Kabul to Kandahar together under Lord Roberts—Sir Frederick as we knew him best—and I got my sergeant's stripes when my master was gazetted a captain. That is why I'm here. It's an agreeable billet for an old soldier."

"Who is his lordship?"

The old warrior drew himself up.

"D'ye mean to say you've never heard that the lord of the manor of Montfort is the Earl of Mountford?"

"No. I'm a horribly ignorant person, being an artist,

and a poor one at that. Still, I would never have made the mistake of deriving Mountford from Montfort."

This interested Jackson.

"Ay," he said. "I'm told the common people blundered there."

"It may have been a thick-headed earl."

"Well, well, who knows?"

By this time a door at the top of the stairs was open, and they entered a well-lighted apartment, given over to the sale of picture postcards of the castle and district, with some guide-books and a quantity of basket-work. Jackson explained at once that he sold the wicker articles for the benefit of some blind soldiers who had settled in the town.

"Poor lads!" he said. "I think they're the greatest sufferers of all by the war."

"What about the millions who lost their lives because the whole world was blind, and apparently remains so?"

The ex-sergeant of infantry confided to his wife afterwards that he didn't quite relish this remark, and was minded then and there to refuse lodging to a pacifist, but the young gentleman looked so pleasant, and was so free from "side," that he thought they might give him a trial.

This doubt was at the back of his mind when, having been introduced to a dear old lady in a lilac-coloured poke bonnet, with a knitted shawl pinned across her shoulders, as "the missus," Aylmer elected to take the sitting-room and bedroom for six weeks.

"No, no, sir," said the old man firmly. "This is a new experiment for the wife and me, just as it is for you. Suppose we all try it for a week, and see how we get on?"

"Capital!" agreed Aylmer instantly. "Can you let me have some ham and eggs and tea this evening, or shall I go to the town, and save you trouble, as you can hardly be prepared to cater for a lodger so promptly?"

The mere suggestion, or the way he put it, pleased Mrs. Jackson.

"Don't think of it, sir," she said. "I can give you a good supper in half an hour."

"That's the way to talk. It cheers one who has walked twenty miles in the sun."

"Have you come that far to-day?" inquired Jackson.

"Yes, all the way across the moors from Rosedale."

"A tidy step. Will you sign the Visitors' Book, sir?"

"Certainly. Where is it?"

Jackson took him to the large outer room, and opened a bulky volume which filled the top of a high desk.

"Here you are, sir," he said.

Aylmer looked at the latest entries. The first name that caught his eye was "Francis Grosmont." He stroked his chin with a puzzled air. Evidently, he was trying to recall something which eluded his memory for the moment. The preceding name, "Betty Luttrell," did not help in the least. Then he noticed the date.

"You've had sight-seers here to-day," he commented.

"Well, hardly that," chuckled the old man. "Lady Betty is the Earl's granddaughter. She lost her father, Lord Westerdale, in the war. Lord Francis Grosmont is the second son of the Marquis of Castleton, and local gossip has it that the two will soon be engaged. Lord Francis flew here this morning from Leeds."

"Flew! . . . I know the idiot now. Is Lady Betty a pretty girl, a bit of a dare-devil with blue eyes, brown hair, a laughing mouth, and the figure of a wood-nymph?"

"Well, sir, she's a fine young lady, an' your description fits her like a skin."

"She didn't fly with Grosmont, I hope?"

"No. She has been at the Hall a week or more. She's to be the Queen of the Tournament. But, pardon me, sir,

while you're in these parts you'll make a mistake if you call Lord Francis an idiot."

"Still, he *is* one."

"That's as may be. Between you and me, sir, he annoyed Lady Betty this afternoon when he said it looked as though they were signin' a marriage register."

"Just what the ass would say, and even then be wrong, because her name comes before his, which is reversing the correct order, I think. However, it's no business of mine. And you're quite right, Mr. Jackson—I really must learn to control my tongue, especially as I can be as big a fool as any man when the opportunity offers."

He took a pen, and wrote "Richard Aylmer" in a firm, plain script, with some hint of the artistic temperament in its freedom and boldness.

Jackson put on his spectacles, and read.

"That's queer," he said. "I saw that name in the paper last week."

"I'm innocent," laughed Aylmer. "I have neither committed a burglary nor assaulted the police."

"Oh, I don't mean that, sir. I have it now. It was in a list of characters for the Pageant which appeared in the local paper. 'Sir Richard Aylmer'—that's it. He had something to do with the history of Montfort in the fifteenth century. Now, isn't that a funny thing? Are you of the same family, sir?"

"I really don't know. My only illustrious progenitor was hanged in Somerset by Judge Jeffries for supporting the Duke of Monmouth's cause, but I certainly have an uncanny feeling that my fortunes are, or have been, bound up with this old castle in one way or another. And now, as I get a most appetising smell of frizzling ham, I think I'll go and remove a layer of Yorkshire dust from my face and hands."

CHAPTER V

AN INTERLUDE

After supper, Aylmer lit a pipe, and invited Jackson to come with him for a stroll through the ruins. Resolving to impose a rigid censorship on a too active imagination and its disconcerting outcome in the spoken word, the younger man listened attentively while his guide recited the history of the place with tolerable accuracy. This did not vary greatly from the chronicles of every other Norman fortress during the Middle Ages and the period of the Renaissance. Montfort became uninhabitable after Sir Thomas Fairfax's guns had battered it into subjection to Cromwell and the Parliament. Only the strong hand of one of Fairfax's descendants had saved it from being torn down altogether for building material needed by the growing town.

The record consisted of a series of battles, sieges, and treacherous surprises, and Aylmer was moved to comment when Jackson pointed out the spot where one of three "unscalable" precipices has been climbed by a rival of the de Montforts during the Wars of the Roses, and the whole garrison put to death or captured because the lordly Baron of that day had ill-treated the sister of an archer in his service.

"Yes," he said, seeming rather to think aloud than address his companion. "It ever was, and will long remain, a grim pile, founded on a people's blood and misery. Yet we idealise those knights of old, though they actually were common robbers and very complete poltroons."

"Oh, come now, sir," protested the old soldier, "they may have been a bad lot in many ways, but you must admit their bravery."

"Not a bit of it. They rode forth to battle so encased in armour that no weapon could reach them, while they murdered unprotected peasants until weary of slaughter. The only risk they ran was of being smothered when a horse fell in a ditch, because they couldn't get up. Once in a while, some giant of a fellow wielded an axe or spiked mace with such force that he could crack the kernel through the iron rind, so he, of course, became a hero of fable. But the average noble warrior suffered chiefly from perspiration. Have you ever heard why ordeal by combat was discontinued?"

"No, sir."

"It was in the early sixteenth century, I think, that a long, thin knight called a short, fat one a thief or a liar, or both, so the dispute was determined by a fight to a finish at Spitalfields. They met on a very hot day, and, after shattering a couple of lances, set to with their swords. They belted each other soundly, until the fat man fell, and the tall fellow flopped on top of him. As neither moved, the marshals of the lists went to pick them up, and found that both had died from sheer exhaustion, neither having sustained a wound. Even in those days the London mob had a sense of humour, so that particular form of legal procedure was never heard of again."

"Well, well," said Jackson, who, however, did not relish this sarcastic analysis of chivalry and knightly prowess.

They were standing on a northerly bastion of the third court, above which rose the massive keep, the ultimate fastness of a series of strong defensive works. Mountford, seen in the gloaming, had the peculiarly cosy aspect of an English country town. As it was now, so had it

been for hundreds of years, and it would probably show little change in as many centuries to come.

Some vague appreciation of its comeliness and beauty passed through the old man's mind.

"It's hard to believe that only four years ago German Zepps passed over here many a night on their way to bomb Leeds and the big camp at Ripon," he muttered.

"I never allow my thoughts to dwell on that stupid and merciless war," said Aylmer, somewhat curtly.

"That must be a rather difficult job," retorted Jackson.

"I have succeeded, at any rate. . . . Are not those riders Sir John and Sir Hugh returning home?"

The resplendent armour and the white cob were easily discernible on the high road. Jackson adjusted his spectacles.

"You'll be meanin' Tommy Trenholme and Major Randolph," he said.

"Oh, is that the knight's name?"

"Ay, an' a fine man he is. Went to France at the age of fifty-five, an' him old enough to be your father."

The ex-sergeant's tone was bitter, and Aylmer little guessed what a storm he allayed when he turned and caught his new acquaintance's shoulder in a friendly grip.

"Please, don't be hurt by my remarks about the war," he said humbly. "You, an old soldier, must be shocked by them. I cannot explain. I merely know that I not only loathe war but the conditions which lead up to it. It's all wrong, damnably wrong. Not even the heroism of the millions who are dead and maimed will make it right."

"Well, that's one way of lookin' at things," said Jackson, who was nevertheless curiously mollified by the mere touch of Aylmer's hand.

"To me it is the only way. . . . Come, let us sit and

smoke under the oak tree, and you shall tell me of Mountford and its people."

Next morning Aylmer wrote to London, and ordered canvas and paint. He found an easel in an old furniture shop in the town, and was carrying it to the Castle on his shoulder when he met Major Randolph, who hailed him pleasantly.

"Getting ready for the fray, I see."

"Yes," said Aylmer, "but it will be a one-sided conflict, from which Art may fly shrieking—not vanquished, but dismayed. How did the bay behave?"

"Perfectly. I think he is secretly proud of his accoutrements."

"He is a fine animal, of course, but hardly in keeping with his character as a Knight's war-horse, I should imagine."

"Why?"

"I think those steel-clad warriors rode heavy-limbed creatures, with feathered fetlocks."

"They had to use the lumbering German and Flemish chargers to carry the weight. There were no others, except an occasional Spanish jennet with a touch of Arab blood in him. My Cleveland bay of to-day would pull any two of those brutes off their feet. That is why German agents nearly broke up our local studs before the war by paying almost any price for both stallions and mares."

"Ah! Another instance of the cobbler going beyond his last."

Aylmer passed on, and the Major looked after him.

"Now, what the deuce did he mean by that?" he mused. "Was he talking about himself or the Boches? Perhaps Tommy Trenholme was right, and he's a bit off his base."

The following afternoon, having gone into the town to buy tobacco, Aylmer learnt that a full dress rehearsal

of the Pageant was imminent. His attention was held at the outset by sight of an apparently very old man riding a bullock, which strange steed carried him amiably enough.

"Who is that?" he asked a bystander.

"Jim Bates. He's Henry Jenkins in the show."

"And who was Henry Jenkins?"

"The oldest man who ever lived in England. He was one hundred and sixty-seven when he died, and till nearly a hundred used to follow the hounds on a bull, but Jim Bates thought that rather risky, so he has trained a bullock to carry him."

Aylmer strolled to the Pageant field. He was stopped at the gate by a man who demanded his name, and referred to a typed list. Evidently the title "Sir Richard Aylmer" sufficed, as the interloper was permitted to pass, Aylmer himself being unaware of any deceit in the matter.

But the Pageant-master, a genius in such affairs, soon caught sight of him, and wanted to know who he was. Aylmer told him.

"I mean your real name?" snapped the puzzled director.

"We seem to be living in topsy-turvy times, so perhaps I should inform you that I am Julius Cæsar," responded Aylmer cheerfully.

"Dash it all, I'm busy—" began the other, but Major Randolph, who happened to be near, said, with a laugh:

"It's all right, Calvert. This gentleman is an artist who has come here to sketch us."

Thus, by unconscious artifice, Aylmer was made free of the enclosure, and mixed freely with its strange medley of actors and actresses attired in the costumes of every age between the reigns of Boadicea and Victoria. The spectacle was lively and gay in the extreme. Men and women bore their resplendent costumes easily enough, and

the eye soon grew accustomed to seeing the Venerable Bede, Queen Elizabeth and Captain Cook standing in a group and smoking cigarettes. Evidently, typed scenarios and spoken parts had just been distributed, and a few sections were "reading the book." Calvert, drawing apart, began to study the ground as a *mise-en-scène* for the larger effects.

"By the way," said Aylmer to the major, "I am given to understand that one of the characters in the Pageant fills the rôle of a knight bearing my own name?"

"Yes? What is that? . . . Oh, the young sprig who dares dispute with Sir Guilbert de Lancy the right to nominate the Queen of the Tournay. There he is, talking to the old johnnie on the bullock. In fact, he sold the animal to Bates."

The man who figured as Sir Richard Aylmer was a tall, well-made youth, not in armour, but wearing a gorgeous tabard and scarlet hose, with raffish hat and buckskin boots, and his namesake eyed him with some interest. At that moment "Sir Richard" cackled loudly.

"Ay," he guffawed, "these Lunnon föalk dëan't ken much aboot t'kye (cattle)."

"Your show is quite democratic," smiled Aylmer.

"Rather. Calvert is a regular martinet in these affairs. He picks his material where he finds it. Queen Elizabeth is a milliner, and Sir Walter Raleigh an auctioneer's clerk. Of course, it is quite reasonable that Lady Betty should be chosen as Queen of the Tournay—luckily she is a very pretty girl—and Frankie Grosmont has to upset Sir Richard in the final bout. But that is only as it should be. Here they are—coming this way. Would you care to meet them?"

"I hope Frankie and I won't quarrel."

At that moment Lord Francis was called away, and

Lady Betty Luttrell came on alone, smiling brightly in response to Major Randolph's salute.

"Let me introduce Mr. Richard Aylmer, who means to put us all on canvas," said the major.

Aylmer, being hatless, bowed. The girl stared at him with unconcealed surprise.

"Didn't I—didn't we meet last month at Hendon?" she almost gasped.

"It is very kind and gracious of you to put it that way," he said. "As the Americans have it, I butted in."

She looked around for an instant at her earlier escort's retreating form.

"I'm afraid Lord Francis was very angry with you that day," she said.

"I hoped so. He shouldn't have risked your life. But I'll try and atone now by making him glorious in oils. I think I can do something with this theme. It appeals."

"Oh, you really are an artist, then?"

"I hardly know yet. If I fail here I shall take to house-painting."

"But Major Bellairs, the commandant at Hendon——"

"Is given to romance. Flights of fancy take one naturally into the clouds."

Her youthful ladyship thought that, for some reason, Aylmer did not wish to talk of flying.

"Well," she said, smiling, "you certainly ought to know that he backed you in the dispute, and made Frankie—Lord Francis—promise not to take me up again until he has had another course in something or other—'stunts' I think they call it. . . . Where are you staying, Mr. Aylmer?"

"In the Castle."

"What—with the Jacksons?"

"Yes."

"Come and call on my grandfather. He loves to discourse on Art. Tell Mr. Aylmer all about us, Major Randolph," and she passed on, having caught the eye of some friend.

"Why didn't you let on you knew Lady Betty?" demanded Randolph.

"I have never met her until to-day, in the social sense of the word," explained Aylmer. "I happened to be passing the flying ground at Hendon when Lord Francis Grosmont's plane crashed, and just escaped a bad toss. I'm afraid I pitched into him when he tried to explain to his companion, Lady Betty herself, that it was an unavoidable accident caused by wire, whereas it actually arose from his own stupidity."

"Were you in the R.A.F. during the war?"

"I've really forgotten what I did during those wretched years."

"You don't say. Well—so long. We'll be meeting again."

The major was huffed for a few seconds. But his ill-humour passed quickly, when he thought with a grin that this eccentric artist was just the sort of chap who would tell off Frankie Grosmont in the right way.

Left to himself, Aylmer remembered that he had a sketching block in his pocket. As it happened, only three sheets had been used, and he could not help recalling when and where. The memory was disturbing. He strode off rapidly, and found the director, who was standing in a Napoleonic attitude, being a short, tubby man, with a big head carrying tufts of black hair. Aylmer was delighted with the sudden conceit of the Little Corporal composing a pageant. He began to draw, with sure, quick strokes, having a real gift that way. Soon he had on paper an excellent study, half likeness, half caricature.

"Mr. Calvert," he said then, "I do wish you'd wear a cocked hat."

"Hello!" cried the great man, well aware that he had been posing, "what are you up to?"

"Trying to catch you in a sublime moment."

"May I see? . . . Yes, yes, very good. What weekly is it for?"

"I—I haven't given a thought to that yet."

"Ah. A free lance. Send it to one of the society journals. But not me alone, you understand. Get hold of Lady Betty, and Frankie Grosmont, and some of the others. Come along. I'll arrange things."

"If you don't mind, I'll take them unawares. People are so much more natural, you know."

Calvert nearly squirmed at that, but Aylmer's face was bland in the extreme.

"Just as you like. But, for Heaven's sake, don't guy 'em. They're a touchy lot, and will hate me like poison in another week. I'll make 'em jump at it before they're ready to face the public, but they'll all be tickled to death to see themselves in the illustrated papers, and black and white is so much more effective than photographs. Now, remember—no bow legs for the men or dumpy figures for the women. And—er—is my tummy quite so obtrusive in profile?"

"I mean to call this 'Napoleon surveys his cohort'."

"Good. I wish more of the people in this part of Yorkshire had a sense of humour. What's your name? . . . Have you a pass? . . . Well, here's one. Tackle me if in any difficulty."

In such wise was Aylmer made free of the pageant ground.

As it happened, he succeeded in getting an admirable drawing of Lady Betty a few minutes later. She was not

in costume, as her rôle had no concern with the different episodes in English history which, interspersed with glees, madrigals, and old-time dances, made up the connected story. She would appear only on the concluding day; her hands would be full otherwise in looking after the house party at the Lodge, where she was acting as hostess for her grandfather, the Earl. So this evening she wore a summery frock of muslin, with a large-brimmed straw hat, and white shoes and stockings. When Aylmer came upon her again she was leaning slightly back on a walking stick, smoking a cigarette, and chatting with Queen Elizabeth. Very dainty and well-bred she looked, slim, graceful, yet straight as a spear, while her face lighted up in amused yet ever-changing expression. Luckily, the pencil caught one of these, and the sketch grew rapidly from that moment. Then, by a flash of inspiration, the artist saw her as Queen of the Tournay, and dashed into a fairy-like, almost ghost-like, study of the noble lady she would portray. How he conjured up the head-dress, the coiffure, the flowing garments of the fourteenth century, he did not know, but unquestionably he had secured two remarkable drawings on the one page, and wrote at the foot: "Lady Betty—and Her Majesty."

Well satisfied with his day's work, which he rounded off by a sketch of "Henry Jenkins on his Bull," he left the field and walked to the Castle. The Jacksons were readers, so he found in their small library a monograph on the stronghold of the de Montforts, written by an erudite Rural Dean of Early Victorian days. It was heavy fare, however, for a summer evening, containing, as it did, long extracts from dead-and-gone scribes who revelled in the cumbrous Latin of the Middle Ages, together with full transcripts of deeds and royal charters in Norman French. Aylmer was somewhat tired, so an hour of deciphering

quaint words and still more puzzling contractions was enough. For relief he turned to a volume of Scott, chancing on the dramatic scenes in "Quentin Durward" which describe the French monarch's unattended visit to the truculent Duke of Burgundy, when Louis not only thrust his head into the lion's mouth but took it out again in safety.

Then came supper, and, Jackson having gone to an Odd-fellows' Lodge, the airman poet who had so often communed with the stars sat alone beneath the oak, and allowed his thoughts to wander unchecked through the realms of historical romance. It was not the wisest thing to do, perhaps, but young men seldom act wisely, even though they may never have been flung headlong from the clouds—else it would be only a dull world.

By nine o'clock, what between the dense mass of the tree and the height of the surrounding walls, the courtyard grew dark. The north-west sky still held light enough to cast shadows, but it was precisely that part of the castle which had defied the elements, mainly because the valley of the Slee fell away there, and the fortress could not be attacked on that side by the artillery of the seventeenth century.

Aylmer's mind was full of jostling impressions, all a riot of colour and movement, a spiritual state somewhat comparable to the effect of a Beethoven symphony on the musician's temperament. Two figures flitted ever through the maze, Lady Betty and Rosalind—the lithe, elegant aristocrat, and the equally lithe, elegant shop-girl. Had not he himself, in the St. Albans tea-shop, told Rosalind that she had all the hall-marks of a duchess? But both girls were habited now in mediæval garments. Neither white nor black silk stockings were visible. Their dresses trailed behind as they moved, and would have touched the

ground in front if one hand, with dainty gesture, had not gathered a fold of the skirt to permit its wearer to stretch forth an embroidered slipper. They wore conical-shaped caps, set well back on their clustered hair, with streamers floating to their shoulders, and the only difference between their gowns was that Lady Betty's was of richer material and more lavishly embroidered.

They mingled with a throng of knights and dames, men-at-arms and serving-maids, and, as the vision became more real, the glare of torches touched walls and pavements with red gleams, and the glow of a log fire came from the guard-room, where soldiers in leather coats and steel caps lounged in twos and threes, while a dozen or more watched some game of chance being played on a great oaken table. Through the open doorway of the second court came sounds of singing, with accompaniment of lute and harp. The whole castle throbbed with life. It was no longer a ruin but a princely residence, whose owner lorded it over a vast domain. Aylmer was about to rise and walk into the banqueting-hall when a hand gripped his arm, and a familiar voice cried:

"You'll be catching your death o' cold, sir, if you sleep out here in a heavy dew. My goodness! You must be tired, I'm thinkin'."

Aylmer came to his senses but slowly.

"Hello! That you, Jackson?" he said. "Yes, I closed my eyes—that much is certain."

Then he woke up thoroughly, and was almost startled by hearing music.

"Is someone playing an instrument?" he asked.

"That's the band in the Town Hall. There's a dance to-night. On a quiet evening we can hear every jig."

Next day, having rounded off, so to speak, his sketches of the pageant by a few vignettes of castle and town, he

despatched them to an illustrated weekly paper which offered a likely field, set up his easel in the shade of the great tree, and began to paint. He attended the next rehearsal with a letter and cheque for £10 in his pocket. The editor wanted more, with a polite request that the artist would pay special heed to people "well known in the county." Aylmer was amused by the instruction, and meant disregarding it. He drew Queen Elizabeth, Agricola, and his first two acquaintances, Sir John and Sir Hugh, and searched for Lord Francis Grosmont, who, however, had gone to London, he was told, to see to the fitting of his armour, which would be a historic suit, worn by an ancestor at the battle of Flodden Field.

Lady Betty drove a friend, the Honourable Pamela Sturton, to the pageant ground somewhat late that afternoon. She pulled up her dog-cart near Aylmer, who was chatting with King Oswald.

"You haven't been to see us," she cried affably.

"I have sent to London for some more reputable garments, Lady Betty," he said. "A knapsack holds all my outfit at this moment."

"You wouldn't have been refused admittance. My grandfather wants to meet you. Mr. Calvert says your work is awfully clever."

"Mr. Calvert evidently uses the Miltonic adjective."

"That's beyond me. . . . Do you get it, Pam?"

"I think so. Mr. Calvert really said the drawings were free and life-like, with a noteworthy absence of cross-hatching."

"Yes. I remember now wondering where the poultry-farm came in."

Both girls laughed, and the Honourable Pamela, whose pretty face was covered with healthy-looking freckles, nodded her introduction to the artist. A man in armour

clanked past, whereupon the pony shied so determinedly that he nearly upset the dog-cart. Aylmer caught the bit, stroked the animal's neck, and had him pacified before an alert groom could spring from the back seat and reach his head.

"Thanks!" said her ladyship. "Do you understand horses as well as aeroplanes, Mr. Aylmer? . . . Oh, sorry. You don't want to talk about aviation, do you?"

"I'll talk about anything if you and Miss Sturton will get down, and let your man lead the cob to the exit. He's up to mischief."

"Did he whisper something?"

"No. I saw it in his eye."

By this time the girls were standing on the turf, and the groom was taking Aylmer's advice.

"Are you good at reading eyes?" she said.

"I might excel, with practice."

"Well, there are lots of nice girls here. Some of them may be willing to help."

"Generalities are not of much use in these matters," he retorted.

"Well, for goodness' sake, gaze into any eyes but mine, or you'll cause more ructions."

She seemed to have urgent business with Mr. Calvert, but was hardly out of earshot of Aylmer when Pamela Sturton said:

"I do believe, Betty, you're half inclined to flirt with that young man."

"Well, stop believing it," said her friend. "I'm not. I—couldn't."

"But, why? I rather like him."

"Then please cut me out at once. There'll be a horrid row when Frankie knows he's here."

"Again, why? Have you been—silly?"

"Pam, dear, you're on the wrong track. The two had a row on the flying-ground at Hendon, and the artist-man had the best of the argument. He's a bit of a mystery, by the way. He must have been a pacifist during the war, judging by the way he talks."

"A pacifist—a shirker!"

"Oh, I don't know. But he says the maddest things. Anyone would think we were as bad as the Germans."

"Such people shouldn't live in England. And I actually thought him rather nice!"

"He is. People speak well of him, but are naturally upset by his theories. It is only fair to say that he personally never says a word about the war until someone else drags it in. But how can we avoid it? Isn't this very pageant a series of living pictures showing how our people arrived at the convictions for which they have just fought, and paid so dearly?"

Pamela understood that her friend was thinking of a dearly-loved father, and her thin lips hardened.

"After all," she said, "why should we bother our heads about Mr. Aylmer or his opinions?"

This was quite a commonsense decision, but one never acted on in a small town, whose inhabitants, weary of discussing each other's shortcomings, unite in picking holes in a stranger's character. Mainly owing to Aylmer's own indiscretions, Mountford obtained a curiously distorted impression of him. His cheerfulness, his unfailing affability, alone saved him from the unpopularity attached to a suspected slacker and even a pro-German. Then, when his sketches were published, everyone admitted their excellence, so public opinion crystallised into the belief that he was an eccentric genius. He would have been vastly astonished had he known how closely he was

being scrutinised, and what an amount of gossip pivoted on him during his first ten days' residence in the place.

And he did not call on the Earl, simply because a dilatory railway company failed to deliver the trunk for which he had written to a storage warehouse in London, and he held that a clean collar and shirt hardly atoned for a much-worn golf suit, distinctly pre-war, and shoes which had suffered from long tramps through heather and on rough roads.

Ex-sergeant Jackson was a loyal friend. Though the old man was certain, after seeing three of Aylmer's canvases, that "there was a screw loose somewhere," as he put it to his wife, he breathed no word of his doubts in the town. Casual visitors to the castle had, it is true, eyed Aylmer's work wonderingly, but Jackson, who always acted as guide, would not permit them to disturb the "artist," so this particular phase of Aylmer's queerness, or oddity, might have escaped common knowledge were not the Earl of Mountford's curiosity whetted by the publication of the first set of pageant drawings, by comments made by Calvert and others, and by the seeming refusal of this strange fellow to share in the hospitality of the Lodge.

On the day Lord Francis Grosmont returned to the North, bearing with him a suit of gorgeous armour, the Earl brought a friend, an expert in archæology, to visit the ruins. Such was his ostensible reason. Actually, he wished to see for himself the young man who was, in a sense, his tenant, and whose singular convictions had set so many tongues wagging.

Aylmer, painting with a zest, gave no attention to the ringing of the bell, since he could trust Jackson to ward off inquisitive folk. He was somewhat surprised, there-

fore, when two elderly gentlemen approached—with no Jackson in attendance—and one of them said:

"Mr. Aylmer?"

"Yes," he replied.

"My name is Mountford. I think you know my granddaughter, Lady Betty Luttrell. This is Professor Hartley-Browne, one-time lecturer on archæology at Oxford."

"Ah, yes, I've heard of you, sir," said Aylmer, smiling at the bearded savant, who, in the current speech of his University, was a Red King among beavers.

"Does that mean you have not heard of me?" demanded the Earl.

"No, my lord. But the graven rock lasts longer than textiles. Your fame rests on foundations less solid, shall I say?"

"The devil it does! But what on earth are you painting?"

"Nothing on earth. That is a sunset, seen above the lower clouds, with a horizon of at least a hundred miles. Of course, paint can only simulate light, but I assure you that the tints of that carpet of gold and green, with the masses of blue and heliotrope in the shadows, are at least faithful in colour if not in luminosity. That latter quality eludes me. I must study Turner when I get back to London. My knowledge is slight, I admit, but from what I have seen hitherto he is the one artist who ever sensed atmosphere. The modern men see that trees are blue or black at a distance, and paint them blue or black; Turner knew they were green, green modified by the density of air and the angle of light. That is all the difference, much as Professor Hartley-Browne can detect the bloom of a prehistoric flint hammer-head from a well-chipped copy."

"Hum. Ha!" said the professor.

CHAPTER VI

AYLMER BREAKS INTO, AND OUT OF, SOCIETY

THE clamour of the door-bell stopped any comment by the Earl, who turned sharply and cried:

"We can't be bothered by sight-seers now, Jackson. It's after four o'clock."

There entered, however, a man bent double beneath a heavy trunk. Aylmer, who had risen from his camp-stool, laughed cheerfully.

"Behold Atlas bearing my world!" he said. "Now, Lord Mountford, if permitted, may I pay a belated call? In any event, I am much beholden to you for the privilege of living in your ancient castle."

"It's mine only by right of purchase by my father."

"You proclaim a better title than the de Montfort who built it. He was a mere ruffian, whose strong arm took what he wanted."

"Hum! Ha!" said Professor Hartley-Browne.

'There's no sense in humming and ha-ing like a one-stringed banjo," growled the Earl. "This young sprig spouts a lot of nonsense, I hear. If the original de Montfort wasn't a proved scoundrel, tell him so."

"It is—er—idle to contrast the—er—methods of the twelfth century with those of the twentieth," wheezed the professor. "They—er—differ as greatly as—er—their architecture."

"Do they?" said Aylmer drily.

"My friend," and the Professor wagged his beard toward the Earl, "does not—er—need to live in a fortress."

"No. His house is defended by a ditch in Flanders holding millions of dead men."

"That's true of all of us," broke in Lord Mountford. "But I'm not anxious to hear you air your pacifist views, Mr. Aylmer. Professor Browne is interested in the archæological side of the castle. Unfortunately, though its history is well authenticated, its internal arrangements are not described in any contemporary work, so we hardly know how or where the occupants lived, as all the purely domestic details have vanished."

Aylmer thought, correctly enough as it happened, that the old gentleman might be a trifle testy in manner, but did not mean to be rude. In any case, he was not looking for gages of conflict.

"Therefore, it's up to you, Professor, to enlighten his lordship," he said pleasantly.

"Ha! Hum!" said the archæologist. "It is—er—easy to date the externals. The *machicoulis* running round the great towers, the small bartizans, also machicolated, the —er—general plan of the fortress, each and all are—er—eloquent of the fourteenth century. I should be—er—inclined to believe that it was built purely as a military work, but—er—when the country became more settled, certain—er—interior graces—one might—er—say luxuries—were added. It is—er—impossible now to do more than guess where these—er—slighter structures were placed."

"Not altogether impossible, sir, if the lamp of knowledge be fed with the volatile spirit of imagination. May I tell you just what I mean?"

"Hum! Ha!" said Hartley-Browne.

"At him, boy! Bite him!" cried the Earl to Aylmer.

"Well, at the height of its fame, for two hundred years before James succeeded Elizabeth, Montfort could house

five hundred soldiers, the household, some twenty guests and their attendants, and a hundred servitors. Where did those people live, to say nothing of their horses? I think the answer is easy. This court was paved, and spacious stables ran round two sides, the north and west. On the south were the guards and the seneschal's quarters, with roomy barracks overhead. On the east, the original battlemented wall, protecting the middle court, was pierced with windows, which lighted a great banqueting hall, its roof enclosing nearly the whole of the court, and supported by arched beams and tie-pieces. At the right there, so that all persons entering came under the close scrutiny of the guard, began what was known as the Grand Escalier, part inclined way, part staircase, but all under cover, giving access to the keep, as well as to the many apartments on the south side, which could not be assaulted, owing to the steep rock, the moat, and the river. In the centre of that covered way was sunk the great well which supplied a sufficiency of water when the castle was besieged."

"A well? There's not the least sign of any well," broke in Lord Mountford, whose wizened, intelligent face betokened his astonishment.

"Ha! Hum! There must have been a well. In troublous times it was—er—a necessity of existence," said the Professor, himself deeply interested.

"Oh, yes. It gave excellent water, straight from the gravel bed beneath a fault in the rock," said Aylmer confidently. "Close to it were vast store-rooms, the dungeons, and the *oubliette,* the latter a fearsome place, where many a poor wretch sighed out his life in darkness and solitude, the only sounds to reach his ears being the clanking of the chain and bucket when the well was in use or the clang

of an iron door when the jailer brought him the food which he had better have been denied."

"Dash it all!" said the Earl irritably. He was no *gourmand*, but disliked anything which might interfere with his dinner, and the picture drawn by Aylmer was not conducive to a good appetite within an hour or so.

"Hum! Ha! Vivid. Quite—er—realistic!" said his crony.

"Sorry! I didn't mean to harrow your feelings," said Aylmer. "Suppose we follow the Grand Escalier. The upper court, or ward, most spacious of the three, accommodated, in one section, the cattle which fed the garrison during the war and close investment. At other times it was a smooth lawn, sometimes given over to tents, if there was a press of visitors, but mostly used as a sheltered promenade. For those who wished to brave the wind there were elevated terraces flush with the battlements. In the keep were the armoury, more stores, and suites of apartments for the officers and chief members of the staff. The covered way passed under the south terrace, so that those using it need not intrude on the noble personages gathered on the lawn. You see, therefore, that Montfort was not only comfortable, as comfort went in the Middle Ages, but its defenders were well protected from flights of arrows, heavy stones, or the first inefficient cannon."

"Where the—where in the world did you learn all this?" demanded the Earl.

"I have not learnt it. I just seem to know it. If you have time, come with me, and I'll show you a few remnants of the features I have described."

He began by pointing out some iron bolts in the north and west walls which might well have clamped the sloping roofs of the stables. Then he indicated large square stones, set in masonry, which supported the massive beams

of the banqueting-hall, while the gradual upward slope, with occasional steps, certainly suggested the great staircase and alley-way which he had described.

"Here," he said, halting where the outer buildings on the south of the second ward curved away in a semicircle, "was the site of the well, together with the sunken entrance to the dungeons and store-rooms. It would seem they have all been filled in, probably to prevent accident, or even stop smugglers from using the place."

Lord Mountford was about to pass some remark, but checked himself. From the northern terrace of the upper court they looked down on the red-tiled town, while the eye could follow the windings of the Slee until the stream was lost in the green and purple shadows of the moors.

"That's my place," said his lordship, pointing to a cluster of chimneys above the trees in the middle distance. "Come and dine to-morrow night. I'll send a car for you at seven-thirty, and it will bring you home about eleven, so warn Jackson. If your baggage runs to a dinner jacket, all right. If it doesn't, again all right."

"An elegant rig of that sort was my latest extravagance," laughed Aylmer.

When the two men left the Castle they kept silence until their car was approaching the town.

"Hartley," said the Earl suddenly, "I'm going to ask you a question, so, for Heaven's sake, don't answer 'Ha! Hum!'"

"Hum! Ha!" said the Professor.

"Well, no more of it this time. What do you think of that young man?"

"He's—er—extraordinarily well-informed. I—er—will make some notes, and—er—see him again."

His lordship picked up a speaking tube.

"Here's where we check him up," he said. "Morrison

—turn to the left, and stop at the second cottage on the right."

The chauffeur obeyed, and a knot of children gathered instantly. A buxom woman came to the open door.

"Is your grandfather in, Mrs. Barker?" inquired the Earl.

"Yes, milord," she answered, with a curtesy, a pretty tribute of respect which lingers yet in rural England.

"Can he come out, or shall I come in?"

"Here he is, milord. He saw your car."

A patriarchal old man appeared. He was bent and gnarled like a withered oak, but a wondrous vitality shone in his eyes.

"Barker," said the Earl, "you're over ninety, I believe?"

"Ninety-fowr, coom Martinmas, milord," was the ready reply.

"And you can remember your grandfather?"

"Ay, sure-ly. Ah was twenty when he died, an' he was born i' 1780. He was a sargint i' t' Fencibles when Owd Boney wanted to invade us."

"Good! I believe you yourself would have had a smack at the Germans if they dared set foot in Yorkshire."

"By gum, Ah would, an' all."

"Well, now, I want to ask if you can remember your grandfather saying anything about a well in the old castle."

"Why, of course, milord. Dearie me! Ah haven't thowt of it fer sixty odd year. It was i' t' second ward, an' soom bairns were lakin' (playing) there ya (one) day, long afore Waterloo, an' yan on 'em fell in. Poor little lass, they could niver git her oot, seä (so) soom unnergroond cellars an' sich-like were blown up with goon-

powther, an' t' well caved in. A few hours' wark wi' picks an' crowbars did t' rest."

"Thanks. That's what I wanted to know. . . . Mrs. Barker, send to the Lodge to-morrow for a bottle of port."

As the car rolled away, the Professor growled "Hum! Ha!" into his beard, but evoked no protest from the Earl, who was frankly puzzled.

Aylmer was attired *de rigeur* when a Rolls-Royce bore him swiftly to the Lodge next day. His clothes had been made in the West-end, and fitted his erect, slender figure perfectly. Lord Mountford gave him an appreciative glance when they met in the great hall which served as a general rendezvous at the Lodge.

"You know my granddaughter and Miss Sturton," he said. "They'll be here in minute or two. Let me introduce you to the Marchioness of Castleton. . . . And her son, Lord Francis Grosmont."

"Hello!" cried the latter, looking at Aylmer sharply. "Haven't we met before?"

"Yes, though I had a faint hope you might have forgotten the occasion."

Grosmont's expression of polite enquiry changed to one of annoyance.

"You don't mean to say—" he began.

"It's only too true. I was abominably rude to you that day. My excuse—but there—I can't offer one. Have you brought the armour I've heard so much of? I am longing to sketch it."

"I've had some photographs taken. If you wish, I'll send you one."

It was an ungracious reply, by Aylmer let it pass.

"Thank you," he said. "That will be useful when it comes to suggesting the pattern of the inlaid work."

At that moment Lady Betty sailed in.

"Ah, you two have met, I see," she cried. "If you were Frenchmen I'd make you kiss and be friends. As it is, Frankie, please get a cocktail for Mr. Aylmer."

"What was the row about?" enquired Lord Mountford amusedly.

"Lord Francis and I had a brief dispute concerning the correct management of an aeroplane," explained Aylmer, being instantly aware that Lady Betty had said no word as to the peril she herself had incurred.

"Ah," chimed in Lady Castleton, "you are very clever, I'm told, but you met your match when you argued with my son about aviation. He's a real enthusiast, and has quite cured me of any natural nervousness I might feel, as his mother. He says it's far less dangerous than polo."

Lord Francis brought a butler with a laden tray. Though vastly surprised at finding his critic on such good terms with the family at the Lodge, he tried now to be affable.

"What's that about polo?" he said. "Is Aylmer an authority on polo, too?"

"Since when have I earned such high repute for wisdom?" smiled Aylmer. "I'm an authority on nothing. I'm dabbling in oils, but find I must go to school again."

"Did you take up flying during the war?" persisted the other.

"It took me up, but dropped me quite suddenly."

"Mr. Aylmer will make us all cross if we talk about the war," announced Lady Betty. "He must go now and tell Pamela Sturton that as I've engaged her as a Lady in Waiting he will give her half a page in the next issue of 'Society in Pictures'?"

"Did that chap really make the sketch of you which appeared last week, Betty?" said Grosmont, when Aylmer quitted the little group.

"Yes. Wasn't it wonderful?"

"There can be no disputing its skill and novelty. Rather weird, I thought it. I suppose that's where the kink comes in."

"What kink?"

"Isn't he regarded as being a trifle queer?"

"Well, yes. I don't know much about him, really, but we may be able to judge better after to-night."

Pamela Sturton had not intended to be civil to Aylmer when next she met him, but his spick and span appearance took her breath away. She changed her mind with all a woman's suddenness—and guile, perhaps—since she realized that she would "get more out of him by being nice" than if she were distant and critical in manner.

"Did you ever see anything like my freckles?" she said, with sweet petulance, stretching out her hands, and facing the light as though to invite inspection.

"Never," he said. "They're perfect."

"That certainly is not a Miltonic adjective," she retorted.

"Why not? A perfect freckle should be not only complete in itself but placed in a delightful environment. I have never inspected a finer collection, and cannot imagine a more beautiful background. Look at their colour, their grouping. There is one on your chin, just beneath a dimple, which is a real gem."

The Honourable Pamela was not prepared for this attack. She raised her blue eyes wistfully.

"I didn't think anyone could console me, but you have succeeded," she murmured. "By the way, have you and Frankie Grosmont buried the hatchet?"

"I hope so."

"Betty and I agreed to keep mum, so he must have had a shock when you met."

"He will become used to shocks—in time."

"The sooner the better. I'll be glad when he and Betty are married. Frankie will tone down, and we other girls may have a chance. No young man looks at any of us when Betty is around."

"I've been looking hard at you for some minutes."

"Ah! That's a beginning, anyhow."

Lady Betty hailed them across the hall.

"You two are grinning like Cheshire cats," she said. "If you promise to be good, Mr. Aylmer, you can take Pamela in to dinner."

"Now, I get *my* chance," he smiled.

"You hop off the mark pretty quickly," said the girl. "But, whisper, for goodness' sake don't be Bolshie in this crowd."

"Bolshie? I?" And he looked genuinely dismayed.

"Yes—you. People say you're a red-hot Socialist."

"Then, in Heaven's name, what is Professor Browne?"

Lord Mountford was compelled to partner the Marchioness, but he had Pamela Sturton on his left hand. The Professor faced Aylmer, and drew him at once into an analysis of the domestic habits of the Norman barons. This was interesting enough for the ladies, who laughed at a breakfast menu of 1350, which consisted largely of salt herrings, boiled beef, and beer, but were horrified at learning that the majority of the noble invaders slept on a litter of straw, while ablutions were by no means even a daily event.

The Marchioness seemed to regard these statements as a reflection on her order.

"I wonder if such facts can really be relied on," she said. "Writers and historians, then as now, seldom or never belonged to the aristocracy."

"It will certainly be a pity if future generations depend

on contemporary memoirs for an accurate estimate of England during the Great War," said the Earl.

"How fortunate for us that Mr. Aylmer is an artist rather than an author!" exclaimed Grosmont.

"How fortunate for me!" agreed Aylmer.

"Excellent!" murmured the Honourable Pamela. "Stick a few pins into that baby. They'll do him good."

"Hum! Ha! The aristocracy of the Middle Ages could neither read nor write," grunted the Professor.

"Their state is even worse to-day, according to Her Grace," said Aylmer.

"Indeed? How do you arrive at that conclusion from any words of mine?" And the Marchioness's eyebrows rounded disapprovingly.

"Because I assume they can both read and write, but you say they don't try to do either."

"I wonder if any of us would like living in a feudal castle to-day," put in Lady Betty, shooting a wrathful glance at Pamela, whom she suspected of egging on Aylmer in this verbal sharp-shooting.

"It would be jolly uncomfortable," said Grosmont. "No beds, no baths, stuffy rooms, red herrings and beer for breakfast, and a hefty chance of an arrow whistling past your ear if you took a stroll on the battlements."

"But, Frankie, I mean under modern conditions."

"I live in one now," said Aylmer. "I assure you I wouldn't change my quarters for a fashionable hotel. Mrs. Jackson is a first-rate cook, and I sleep like a top."

"Mrs. Jackson! Are you staying with the caretakers at Montfort?" cried Grosmont.

"Yes. I have been there nearly a fortnight."

"And have used your time so well that you told me more about the old place yesterday than I heard before during the whole of my life," said the Earl.

"Ha! Hum! I—er—hope before you leave you will —er—write a memoir—I—er—mean a monograph on Montfort," said the Professor, bravely ignoring the merriment caused by his slip.

"Mr. Calvert should undertake that agreeable task, as an introduction to the book of the Pageant," said Aylmer.

"Hi! Who's taking my name in vain?" demanded Calvert, from the other end of the table.

"I," said Aylmer. "But not in vain, I'm sure. If you'll collaborate with Professor Hartley-Browne in a little history of Montfort I'll contribute some thumb-nail drawings of the castle as it is and as it was."

Nearly everyone vowed that this would be a capital idea, until Calvert remarked drily that they knew little of the ways of twentieth-century printers; the "copy" had been sent off a week ago, and he was not quite sure that the book would be ready on the Saturday before the Pageant.

"Oh, Mr. Aylmer, I meant to ask you something," said Lady Betty. "Where did you get the description of my dress? It is not made yet, and I never showed you the sketch, which Mr. Calvert brought from the British Museum."

"I just imagined it," said Aylmer. "But the odd thing is that I fell asleep that evening under the great oak in the first court, and saw you in a dream, wearing that identical costume."

"How thrilling!" twittered Pamela.

"Was I wandering about alone, like a ghost?" laughed Lady Betty.

"No. The place was full of life and movement, all mediæval."

"Did you recognise anybody else?"

"Yes, another lady."

"Who was she?"

"A girl named Rosalind."

"Any Rosalind whom I know?"

"No. I don't suppose you have ever met or ever will meet her."

"Were Rosalind and I friends in your dream?"

"You were certainly in the same gallant company of lords and ladies, knights and men-at-arms. If I could paint the scene, I would be famous next day."

"Then, why don't you?"

"Because I am just beginning to realise that art is a stern mistress, who exacts many years of undivided attention before she grants her lover as much as a smile, let alone a tender embrace."

The Marchioness was quite sure now that the conversation was becoming slightly indecorous, to put it mildly, so she asked Lord Mountford if he had heard the new Dean preach in the Minster. His lordship simply had to be polite.

Pamela, by chance, touched on music, and they fell to discussing the madrigals interspersed throughout the Pageant.

"Have you included the 'Cockoo Song,' the earliest known English ballad?" inquired Aylmer.

"No," broke in Calvert, who had an ear for every word Aylmer uttered. "For the life of me, I couldn't find the correct music."

"I think I can hum it for you after dinner."

This haphazard remark led to a few enthusiasts gathering round a piano in the drawing-room, while Aylmer rendered the somewhat dirge-like chant of the early fourteenth century:

Sumer is icumen in
Lhudé sing cuccu,
Groweth sed, and bloweth med,
And sprigth ye wedé nu:
Singe cuccu.

"Wine, women and song" might be fiddler Cellini's formula for earthly happiness, but they were an unfortunate combination for Aylmer. Encouraged by Calvert, he sang many another old English stanza, and drew all but inveterate bridge-players to the circle of musicians. It was long past eleven when he contrived to break away. He was miserably aware next morning that his nerves were utterly unstrung, and that he had lost much if not all of the benefit of those peaceful rambles across the moors, followed by the calm seclusion of life in Montfort Castle.

Hence, he made up his mind to keep absolutely to himself until his state of mental excitation had passed, and Calvert was a greatly aggrieved man when he received an emphatic refusal to his warm request that Aylmer should help actively in preparing and rehearsing the musical part of the Pageant. Indeed, Aylmer's new attitude hurt, if it did not antagonise, many of his latest friends, and a whole fortnight elapsed before he was taken back into the fold. He did not attempt to paint, but went for long tramps over the moors, so none could find him. He declined, on the ground of ill-health, a second invitation to dine at the Lodge. He also ignored several frantic requests for more sketches. When an irate editor got in touch with Calvert, the latter telegraphed a trenchant opinion that the artist was mad as a March hare.

Meanwhile, on the 23rd day of the month, a new moon sailed into the sky; that afternoon Aylmer revisited the Pageant field. He was received coldly at first. Lady

Betty did not see him at all. The Honourable Pamela Sturton gave him a grave little nod. Calvert wanted to know where the devil he had been and what the devil was the matter with him.

But Major Randolph listened to his plea of illness, though obviously perplexed by the sufferer's bronzed face and fine physical condition. Aylmer was sensible of these barriers to complete sympathy.

"I don't mind explaining to you," he said, "that I had my skull badly cracked two years ago, and ever since have had to avoid mental excitement in certain forms, notably music. I dined at the Lodge earlier in the month, and was fool enough to sing. As a result I've been off the map all this time. I'm afraid you people are vexed with me, but I cannot help it. If I hadn't gone back into my shell I might have broken down altogether, and I want to avoid that, if possible, though my final collapse will hurt no one but myself."

"I'm glad you've told me that," said the other. "Do try and make some more sketches, however. Calvert says the first batch gave us a terrific advertisement. He has doubled the price of the tickets, but it's for a good cause, as every penny goes to Yorkshire hospitals."

The director was already regretting his petulance. He came now with a broad hint that Aylmer might find scope for his pencil in the return of a hunting party to the Castle after a successful foray with hawk and hound, while, within half an hour, Lord Francis, as Sir Guilbert de Lancy, would ride a tilt with Sir Richard Aylmer. Each knight would wear over his armour a loose tabard bearing his device, while a fluttering cloak of silk, with slittered edges, would lend picturesque effect when the horses broke into a gallop.

"We have dispensed with the padded tilting helmets,

because they look so uncouth," he added. "The combatants run no risk, however. The lances are built up of sections so loosely glued together that they will shiver at the moment of impact right up to the—I don't know its technical name—the guard in front of the grip——"

"The vamplate," said Aylmer. "The leather band below the grip was called the 'bune.' "

Calvert had no time to be astonished. He took these things as gifts from the gods.

"Anyhow, I'm glad to see you again, and there's some meaty stuff on the boards to-day," and he breezed away.

And, in fact, Aylmer was soon busy. The procession, winding along the meadows and entering the Castle gate, was a most effective spectacle, and the realistic clash of the jousters in mid-career brought shrieks from some of the female onlookers. The Earl of Mountford came to watch this particular incident; he caught sight of Aylmer, hard at work on the opposite side of the lists, and hurried across as soon as the excitement had ended.

"Well, young man," he said ironically, "what favourable gale has blown you Pageant-wards again?"

"I can only reply with Hamlet:

> "I am but mad north-northwest: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a hand-saw."

said Aylmer, who had seen the Earl approaching, and was ready with a quip.

"Ay, you're glib enough with your tongue," said his lordship, "but let me tell you you've upset Hartley-Browne so thoroughly that he has gone off to his museum, while the younger generation in my house won't even hear your name mentioned."

"There are times in the life of every man when he has to endure unjust ignominy. This is one."

"But why *did* you behave so—so foolishly?"

"I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of regaining my senses. You know, I suppose, that I am not quite *compos mentis*. Well, I am happy and content that way. The visit to your house, the mere mixing with sane people, was utterly disturbing, so I had to absent myself. Moreover, I actually earned £20 in a week by my sketches, and where is the young artist who would not lose his equilibrium under an avalanche of success like that?"

"Have you apologised to Lady Betty?"

"In her eyes I am but a sheet of glass. She has looked through me twice to-day."

"Dash it all, there she goes now, or I would secure your forgiveness! Come and dine. Come as you are. Our place is nearly empty until next week."

"Won't you come and share my meal? Mrs. Jackson makes the best beefsteak and kidney pie I've ever eaten."

"By gad, I'll do that."

"I haven't any wine. I drink tea."

"Tea! Would you murder me? But I'll bet you half a crown old Jackson will produce a bottle of beer."

So, to the wide-spread astonishment of the pageanteers, the old peer and the mad artist went off together toward the Castle, while many heard his lordship bid the chauffeur call for him at ten o'clock.

The truth was that Lord Mountford was a man of sufficient spirit to bestow his friendship where he thought fit. He was greatly attracted by Aylmer's frank and amiable nature, while a spice of curiosity was not lacking, since the younger man's past was shrouded in obscurity, and his weirdly exact knowledge of life in the Middle

Ages lent a mystical and almost uncanny aspect to his personality.

Mrs. Jackson was flustered by the presence of the Earl, but the pie was cooked to a turn, and the ex-Sergeant staged not one bottle of beer, but four. Aylmer believed that the brew would do him no harm. It made him talk, however. Lord Mountford was such a human old fellow that the younger man could not but regard him with respect and confidence, so he launched out into a fairly full account of his life before the war and his experiences in France.

The Earl listened with growing amazement. At last he had to burst forth joyously.

"Why, you're the chap we heard so much of in 1917—'the Singing Poet'—the astounding johnnie who used to go mooning off through the clouds, and sweep Taubes and Fokkers out of the way, not because they were Germans but because they interfered with the view!"

"There were some silly tales told of me at the time, but most of them were nonsensical and the rest exaggerated," and Aylmer reddened with embarrassment, as he little foresaw such prompt recognition.

"God bless my soul! Wait till Grosmont opens his mouth again! Just wait!"

"Really, sir, I must beg of you not to breathe a word of what I have told you. If you do, I shall have no alternative but to pack up my traps and vanish."

"But, why?"

"I am far from well yet. The music the other night did me no end of harm. If I am brought back to the war I shall crack up completely."

His lordship was much disappointed, but could not help admitting that his host's demand was reasonable.

"All right!" he grumbled. "I'll keep a shut mouth.

But, look here! I want one of those cloud pictures now. Name your figure."

Aylmer opened a sectional portfolio, and arranged four canvases in the best light available.

"Which do you prefer?" he said simply.

The Earl decided without any delay.

"That one," he said.

"You are no bad judge," laughed the artist. "That is 'A Sunset in the Ardennes.' The ridge of deeper gold is the forest line. Remember, the sun is sinking behind you. As a matter of fact, two wretched Germans came droning out of that blaze of glory while I was gazing at it."

"It's mine. What's the price?"

"Your silence, Lord Mountford. I want to clench the bargain!"

"Dash it all!" vowed the other. "I'd sooner pay you fifty quid!"

CHAPTER VII

MOON-MADNESS

Before the Earl went home he told his host how old Barker had substantiated the existence of the well. Then he hurried off with the picture tucked under his arm, wondering doubtless how he would explain it away to Lady Betty and the rest. He could never guess what emotional depths he had plumbed by that casual reference to the well!

Aylmer strolled to his favourite seat under the oak, and listened to the twittering of the bats holding high revel in the court-yard. That afternoon he had seen a thin and pallid sickle in the southeastern sky, and knew he was looking at the new moon. For some reason, his thoughts reverted to it now. Often in France had he flown by moonlight. Once, indeed, he encountered a German bomber, bent on mischief where lights proclaimed a British hospital far behind the lines, and gave the Hun a woeful surprise.

So it was not altogether strange that, after the hour of stirring memories evoked by Lord Mountford's sympathy, his thoughts should wander into unknown regions, nor, when they came back to earth again, that they should abide with the unreal rather than the real. Of course, he had no difficulty in re-creating a scene in the castle of the de Montforts, but, this time, his over-wrought brain seethed with fantasy, and he literally saw, though dimly, figures moving on the lawn of the upper ward, seemingly in the full brilliance of a summer's day. He was not dreaming, because dreams connote sleep. He merely

allowed full play to a too-vivid imagination. A transcendental Buddhist would have claimed that the soul had attenuated itself out of its mortal environment, whereas Sir James Macpherson would have admonished him sharply, given him a strong dose of bromide, and sent him to bed. Be that as it may, his body rested peacefully beneath the oak, as Mr. and Mrs. Jackson well knew, but in all the qualities of his five senses he was one of a distinguished company of people gathered in the most secluded part of the castle during some long-forgotten period of its history.

That is to say, at first he was with them, but not of them. He might have been peering through a luminous mist, which, however, was clearing gradually. He became aware, too, of an almost overpowering feeling of jealousy which evidently centred in two people, a young woman whose busy fingers passed silken threads through a frame such as ladies skilled in the art of embroidery use while fashioning covers for chairs or foot-stools, and a man some few years his senior in age, who, while conversing with an older and most dignified-looking personage, was undoubtedly much interested in the girl, judging by the glances he shot continually in her direction. He found time, too, despite an eager absorption in his companion's talk, to look sometimes at Aylmer himself; then his brow bore a frown, while his eyes conveyed swift menace.

The girl, who wore the costume devised for Lady Betty Luttrell in the Pageant, bent her face studiously over the frame. Her nimble fingers plied needle and thread as though her very existence depended on the speedy completion of the task. An elderly dame, portly, and richly garbed in wine-coloured silk, was interested in both the progress of the work and the earnest colloquy of the men. A second girl, seated with her back to Aylmer, whose

graceful form, with golden-brown hair clustered above a slender neck, seemed somehow familiar to the onlooker's eyes, was knitting assiduously, but with an occasional quick glance for each of the two groups. The men were so far away that their words were inaudible to Aylmer. The stout lady would ever and anon address a remark to one of the girls, and receive an answer. He was sufficiently near to catch what was said, yet a certain restraint, as of inferiority in rank, kept him from sharing in this desultory chatter. He was not even aware, in his trance, that they used Norman-French, a quaintly Latinised variant of the French language, with many Celtic words interspersed, of which he, in his normal senses, knew little more than he had gleaned from the dry-as-dust records compiled by the Early Victorian Rural Dean. But he certainly understood now, and could have addressed them himself in the same tongue, had he dared. Since he himself, much later, did not attempt to repeat their sentences in the difficult idiom of Chaucer's English, it will be as well if his own version of what was said be given.

When, with that quickening of his faculties already likened unto a vanishing mist, came actual knowledge, he heard the older woman say querulously:——

"Why this fever of industry, Lisbeth? That idle varlet, Tam's son, is more like to be stretched on his back in the shade near the river than fitting together the pieces of the couch you have planned."

"Mayhap, mother," answered the girl, never raising her head, "the mere sight of my completed task will spur him to better effort."

"A stirrup-leather wielded by Chief-Warder Dagobert will prove more persuasive."

The Countess de Montfort—Aylmer was now thoroughly acquainted with all those on the lawn, they being

the Count and Countess de Montfort, the Lady Elisabeth, their daughter, Mademoiselle Rosalind Seaton, a cousin, and Sir Guilbert de Lancy, lord of a neighbouring estate; he even recognised the identity of the absent and strong-armed Dagobert—the Countess, then, relapsed into an uneasy silence for a brief space. One could hear the slow cadence of the Count's speech; Sir Guilbert adopted so low a tone that the movement of his lips was alone perceptible.

But the Countess felt that she must talk, if only to conceal some troublesome thought.

"That skein is too blue in tint for a *fleur-de-lis,*" she said. . . . "What? You are planning a border of corn-flags? I prefer the heraldic designs. They are more in keeping with one's surroundings. . . . I wonder what grave matter occupies your noble father and the Sieur de Lancy. . . . Rosalind, was it you who told me the Bruces of Armathwaite were seeking cause for renewed quarrel with Sir Guilbert?"

"Madam—I—I only repeated some foolish gossip which reached my ears," stammered Rosalind, who was flurried by this direct question.

"There is more than foolish gossip afoot," snapped the Countess angrily, though taking care not to raise her voice. "If it be true what you said—that Sir Guilbert has rued his promise to marry the Bruce's sister, there will be broken heads to mend ere long, or I know little of those fire-brands at Danby."

The Lady Elisabeth rose hastily, gathering up her materials.

"It is too hot here in the sun," she murmured. "Permit me to go to my room for an hour, dear mother."

She crossed the lawn rapidly, passing close to Aylmer. Her eyes were full of tears, and the look of sorrow she

gave him was so eloquent in its distress that he stepped forward involuntarily.

"Not a word!" she breathed. "It is useless now. After the evening meal—on the south terrace—for a minute, perhaps."

The Countess wriggled in her chair, and Mademoiselle Seaton sprang to assist her.

"I, too, feel the heat," she said wearily. "Do you remain here, Rosalind. Sir Richard will escort me to the middle ward. I would have a word with the steward."

The Lady Elisabeth had vanished already through an arch which gave access to the Grand Escalier, but the Count de Montfort, if too late to recall his daughter, intervened promptly now.

"Richard," he said, with the air of one who wished to phrase an imperative command graciously, "wait here! The Sieur de Lancy will need his retinue soon. Mistress Rosalind—you may accompany madame."

There was nothing to be done but obey. Rosalind gave Aylmer a demure glance which he failed altogether to intercept, for his eyes were shooting lightning flashes of anger.

"Take care!" whispered the girl. "De Lancy is more than ready to denounce you, and you know what that would imply—to all."

Left to himself, Aylmer mounted some steps leading to the south terrace, and looked down the valley of the Slee. Beyond a few cultivated fields near the Castle it was wooded to the water's edge, but he saw nothing of its placid charm because his heart was afire. Why should Guilbert de Lancy, solely by virtue of the broad acres which marched with the de Montfort demesne, come to this eyrie and snatch the Lady Elisabeth from the longing arms of one who hoped to win her if given only a

few short months? It was but a year since he, Richard Aylmer, had been knighted for valour in the field, and a petition to the King was now under consideration which would probably restore to him a Somersetshire estate forfeited to the Crown by a father who, with unwise fealty, had supported the cause of Richard the Second. Why could not de Lancy have married Margaret Bruce? Was he here to-day as a suitor? A hundred questions, a thousand fantastic conceits, jostled in his mind in furious contest, but his vagrom thoughts were recalled by de Montfort's courteous request that he should conduct Sir Guilbert to the gate, and attend his departure with due ceremony.

The two young men walked together in silence down the Grand Escalier. De Lancy had an eye for the ladies' apartments in the centre of the south wall, but no sight of them was vouchsafed him.

"Why did the Lady Elisabeth hurry away so quickly?" he asked, trying to lend some semblance of civility to a haughty manner.

"I heard her complain of the heat to the Countess, her mother," said Aylmer.

"God's bones! Heat, on a day like this! Shyness, rather, I take it! She guessed my errand, and, like every true maid, ran to hide her blushes."

To this Richard, who nearly choked with fury, had nothing to say, and his silence seemed to annoy the visitor. In the outer ward—thus were they known, outer, middle, and upper, retaining their old names, though the centre court had long been roofed over—the Sieur de Lancy was armed by his squires, since the Bruces of Danby were a hard-riding gang, and a strong detachment might possibly be hidden in a fold of the moorland to

intercept his homeward journey of ten long miles to Pickering.

When the knight was equipped cap à pie, a score of well-mounted soldiers filed out under the portcullis. Sir Guilbert was the last to depart, Aylmer, as in duty bound, walking by his side beyond the drawbridge. Suddenly, de Lancy bent low in the saddle.

"A word in your ear, my friend," he said, still striving to speak with proper courtesy. "It has been settled to-day that I wed the Lady Elisabeth ere the New Year. Do you wish me well in my wooing?"

"Wooing?" repeated Aylmer bitterly. The sarcasm leaped from his tongue. It was all he dared say, but it nettled the other.

"Call it what you will. Mark the motto on my shield—*Ce que je veuille je prends*—I take what I want—a bold claim, but I stand by it," and the war-horse's hoofs struck fire from the flint stones of the causeway as the boaster dashed after his gallant company, now wheeling into the eastward road.

Richard returned to the upper battlements. He watched the cavalcade fording the river about half a mile away, and climbing a hill until the trees and shrubs gave place to heather. For many minutes the sun glinted from armour and spear-points, marking the homeward progress of his powerful and too-successful rival. He was tempted to seek out the Count de Montfort, ask leave to ride to London and plead his cause before the King in person, beseeching his friend and benefactor meanwhile not to pledge Elisabeth irrevocably to de Lancy. It was a hopeless undertaking, he well knew. These great Norman nobles were land-hungry as any crofter in the hamlet of Thorneythwaite, and the estates of de Montfort and de Lancy, if joined by a marriage between the heiress of the

one and the owner of the other, would rank high among the proudest fiefs in the North country.

A slow, heavy step aroused him from a frenzy of loss and longing. It was Dagobert, making his hourly round. By night, he or a deputy visited the sentinels every half hour. The big warder saluted him with rough geniality.

"A stoup of good wine has just been opened in the guard-room, Sir Richard," he said. "Will you not haste and claim your share, else it will all be poured into the dry gullets of a thirsty captain and his lieutenants?"

"Wine!" cried Aylmer. "Whence comes wine at this hour?"

"From the largesse of the Sieur de Lancy. They say his suit must have sped happily, else he would not be so free with his gold pieces."

Aylmer knew at once that the gruff old fellow was trying to do him a kindness by warning him that he must cast his eyes elsewhere than on the Lady Elisabeth. He hurried off, only to seek his own apartment, and there brood on his untoward fortunes. He was too fair-minded to blame the man who had reared him from childhood and advanced him to a point when the King's clemency might restore the good repute of his house. The whole wretched business sprang from the breaking-off of the long-projected marriage of de Lancy and Margaret Bruce, a lady whose charms were not altogether enhanced by her size.

De Montfort, no doubt, regarded Aylmer as a poor relation who deserved advancement, and little imagined, until that very day, that he might dream of a family alliance. De Lancy, however, had not scrupled to hint that the boy and girl friendship between Elisabeth and the Count's *protégé* might ripen into a stronger bond. While Richard was eating his heart out in his turret-room,

the master of the household was telling his spouse in the plainest of plain Norman French, that she had been more than foolish to permit the one-time penniless squire to be so much in her daughter's company, whereto the lady retorted that the Count himself had brought the lad to the Castle, had given him and Lisbeth the same tutors, and had even caused him to be dubbed a knight.

In effect, though the weather was fine outside, a heavy storm was brewing within the Castle walls.

The chief meal of the day was served at five o'clock. Some forty persons dined in the great hall—ten at an elevated cross table, and the remainder at two tables set lengthwise. Richard knew when Elisabeth entered—he would have known were he blindfolded—but he could neither see nor speak to her once she was seated, as the Count and Countess, and two senior officers of the garrison separated them. Still, as the evening wore, there was no reason why they should not meet, as they did nearly every day, so he was both surprised and uneasy when de Montfort gave him an unexpected order.

"Sir Richard," said the Count, while a boar's head was being carved, "when the meal is ended I want you to take a hundred men on a long march. Our rascals are growing fat and lazy on unlimited supplies of beef and beer. Swing them along for a good twelve miles, and see to it that every soldier in the place is exercised in that way every fifth day without intermission during the next two months. They must all be fully armed. Sir Guy and Sir Bevis will attend to their daily training in the court and on the meadows."

The command, clearly heard by all in the room, caused a buzz of excited comment. None could misinterpret its significance. This was active preparation for war.

"It shall be done, my lord," said Aylmer. There were

to be no more games with the two girls in the upper ward during the long summer evenings. The Count foresaw that the slight put on Margaret Bruce might be avenged on others than the chief offender, de Lancy.

An hour later, Aylmer, accompanied by an experienced lieutenant who would test the soldiers in various warlike manœuvres in the open country, rode through the main gate. As he crossed the draw-bridge his horse stumbled and nearly threw him.

"Come, sir!" said someone loudly. "I daren't let you sleep here. As I told you the other night, this is the easiest way to catch a cold."

It was dark, but Aylmer struggled back to consciousness because of some vague recognition of a friendly voice. Sergeant Jackson had used quite moderate tones, yet the words rumbled like distant thunder in Aylmer's ears. His first sensation was one of real relief that he was heart-whole and fancy free, and this was succeeded by an immense astonishment.

"Why has night fallen so quickly?" he asked, being keenly aware at once how oddly the accents of modern English contrasted with the quaint sentences so recently on his lips.

Jackson was puzzled.

"You haven't been sitting there so long, sir," he said. "His lordship has not been gone more than ten minutes, but the missus fancied you were nodding, so I came out to see, and I had to shake you hard before you awoke."

Two sets of vivid memories were jumbling in Aylmer's brain, but he managed to sort them out sufficiently well to put a reasonable question.

"Ten minutes!" he said. "Are you quite sure I have slept only ten minutes?"

"Not five, sir. You were smoking your pipe at first."

The old man struck a match, and stooped. "Here it is," he went on, "and the bowl is still warm."

Aylmer stood up. He actually felt his breast and arms for the steel plates which he fancied must yet cover them.

"I ate too much of that excellent pie," he laughed. "I've had the most vivid dream, Jackson."

"Ay, sir, no doubt. You'll have been sitting awkwardly on that hard bench. Our grandfathers were right when they said:— 'After dinner rest a while; after supper walk a mile.' I don't do it myself, but I've tramped so many miles in my life that I take things easy now. Our colonel was a devil for night marches."

Aylmer laughed again. How readily one jumped from the fourteenth century to the twentieth!

"The best military experts have always regarded them as excellent training," he said.

By this time the two were climbing the worn steps leading from the guard-room.

"Right enough," wheezed Jackson. "Many a good soldier fears the shadows. I'll never forget my first spell of sentry-go at midnight in the Khyber. There wasn't an Afghan within five miles of our bivouac, but I could see one behind every rock big enough to hide a man. I even made out their gleaming eyes."

"Join me in a drink," said Aylmer. "A whisky and soda will steady our nerves."

"My nerves are all right nowadays, sir. Lord love a duck, I've almost forgotten those old days! Only last month I was readin' a history of the march from Kabul to Khandahar, an' I actually wondered if I was ever there!"

"Naturally. History differs so greatly from fact; it puts a mask on reality."

The epigram pleased the old warrior.

"That's true, an' all," he agreed. "Now, there was the battle of Charasiab. The 'Chestnut battery' of Horse Gunners was ordered to retire, but, by a queer mistake, it advanced, so the whole line, horse, foot, an' artillery, had to advance, too. The Afghans thought we were chargin', an' broke. By gum! if it had been the other way—well, I wouldn't be drinkin' your health to-night!"

Aylmer felt unusually tired, though he had not done anything that day in the shape of physical exercise to account for it. His eyelids were drooping with desire for rest, yet he dreaded sleep if it brought only exhausting dreams. Once in bed, however, and his head had hardly touched the pillow before he fell into sound slumber; next morning, just as had happened at Wheathampstead, he found himself thoroughly refreshed in mind and body.

He smoked the first pipe after breakfast—that best of all pipes—on the south terrace. He went there to try and puzzle out a difficult problem. If death, or, far worse, insanity, would be the certain penalty of the brainstorms which seemed to be crowding in on him of late, could he do anything to avoid them? For instance, if life in this remote corner of the North Riding brought such realistic visions, would it not be wise to break away, take to the road again, or even rush off by train to Wales or the Highlands?

Then he thought of Lord Mountford's genuine kindness, and of the pain an abrupt departure would cause to the many well-disposed people who were ready to overlook his queer behaviour during the past fortnight. In helping the Pageant he was even rendering some service to his fellowmen, while there could be little doubt that his sketches were building up a possible career. That drawing of the hunting-party, for instance, was good work.

It revealed qualities he did not know he possessed. If newspapers and periodicals were minded to abandon the craze for photographs, and go back to the truer art of the line as directed by the imaginative mind and the skilled hand, what happier or healthier life could he lead than by accepting such commissions?

The answer to both questions seemed to suggest a compromise. He would leave Montfort after the Pageant. Surely he could fight for ten more days against the absurd delusions which affected his subconscious mind.

Then, being in judicial mood, he did not hesitate to analyse that amazing dream of the previous night. He assumed that the dormant emotions stirred into activity by the talk with Lord Mountford brought about a state of mind favourable to cerebral excitement. But, waking or dreaming, why was his own personality so bound up with the ancient history of the Castle? He was sane now —as sane as he ever had been or could hope to be—yet by some strange trick of eyesight as conveyed to the comparative faculties of the brain, he could, at this very moment and in bright sunshine, re-create the old town, the ford, the Chapel of St. Mary—even the morions and spear-points of the sentries otherwise hidden by the battlements of each projecting turret and bartizan. By sheer force of will he dispelled the vision instantly—danger lay that way.

But he refused to be alarmed, disquieting though the experience might be. He meant to conquer these illusions, and success could not be attained by ignoring them. So he reviewed his over-night dream in detail. He remembered reading somewhere that a dream, no matter how long a period it covered, actually flitted through unknown cells of the brain in a few seconds. An officer who fought through the Battle of Waterloo, which lasted ten long

hours of a June day, fell asleep within sound of Big Ben at Westminster when the clock began to chime the midnight hour, witnessed and again took part in every phase of that spectacular fight, and awoke before the twelfth hammer-stroke boomed from the bell. This authentic story bore out Sergeant Jackson's testimony, and it brought a curiously reassuring feeling. He had only dreamed, then—yielding to a phenomenal kinetic action of the mind—and his obsession was not an instance of some unknown and terrifying psychic force. So far, this was satisfactory. He breathed more freely because of the belief.

There remained the identity of the chief characters in the romance. The Count and Countess de Montfort, Sir Guilbert de Lancy, Chief Warder Dagobert—all the officers and men-at-arms he had seen so intimately, were utter strangers, people as completely outside his personal ken as was the language they spoke. He had never heard of the Bruces of Danby. He did not know the indisputable fact, carefully concealed by all true Scots, that Robert Bruce was born in Yorkshire.

There remained the Lady Elisabeth de Montfort and Mistress Rosalind Seaton, whom he had clearly identified as Lady Betty Luttrell and that sweet-faced if somewhat petulant London shop-girl, Peggy Jones—Peggy Never-mind-the-rest-of-it; he smiled tolerantly now at recollection of that mad frolic.

Well, what of it? Until he was nineteen the society of girls was anathema to him. Then came the four years of war, when he alternated between the glorious thrills of flight and an unutterable loathing of the conditions of life at the front—a few brief hours of heaven making barely endurable the hell of earth—followed by nearly two years in hospital or under medical supervision.

Women had not entered at all into his scheme of things before he met these two, the daughter of a patrician and the daughter of some undistinguished Jones. What more natural than that they should figure as the heroines of his dream-romance? It was amusing to recall his frenzied passion for the Lady Elisabeth, but not quite so amusing to know that Rosalind was enamoured of him. If he had been blind to this latter development in his dream he was fully aware of it in his waking state, and, for a moment, there came remembrances of a certain rapturous kiss in the inn at Wheathampstead. Of course, that lapse was merely stupid, and quite harmless. At any rate, it bore no sort of relation to the strenuous state of affairs which seemingly existed in the Castle of the de Montforts six hundred years ago.

He was quite cheered by the discovery of a fairly rational theory which accounted for some part of a strange spiritual adventure. Perhaps, in time, he might find some reasonable explanation of his uncanny knowledge of a place he had never before seen. In his boyhood he had devoured all of Scott's novels—was it not possible that the Wizard of the North had planted in his youthful mind certain definite pictures of the days of chivalry and their glittering panoply which were ever being revivified by the sights of the Pageant aided and abetted by actual residence within the walls of a time-worn fortress? And, finally, that sudden contact between his skull and a French gravel-pit had a good deal to do with the matter, no doubt.

Greatly cheered by what he regarded as his own lucidity of thought, he consigned all temporo-sphenoidal and other lobes to the scientific Limbo where such monstrosities lurk, and hurriedly transferred to a drawing-pad a faithful sketch of Sir Guilbert de Lancy and his troop of men-at-arms leaving the Castle. His work had

a telling quality of masses of black and high lights which made it peculiarly suitable for reproduction. He did not know this. He drew to please himself, and thus, all unconsciously, obeyed the foremost canon of art by expressing his mood of the moment.

Mrs. Jackson came with her daily enquiry as to what he wanted for dinner. He would generally suggest fried goldfish and stewed peacocks' tongues, or sigh with Shelley:—

> Oh, for a beaker full of the warm South,
> The true, the blushful Hippocrene,

but the old lady would pin him down to a choice between beef, mutton and chicken. On this occasion, when a chop was decided on, she lingered to look at the drawing.

"My word! Mr. Aylmer," she vowed, "you've got them horses movin' all right."

"Yes," he said, gravely critical, "but that brute turning into the road is lame, and I can't tell in which joint."

She took him seriously.

"There's lots of clever people who can't find out which leg a horse is lame in," she said. "My father, who was huntsman for the old Sinnington Pack, used to say the only sure way was to ride bareback a few yards."

"By the way, you were born in these parts, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Yes, sir—in Benson's Yard, off the High-street."

"Then you can supply some local history. Lord Mountford's family name is Luttrell?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are the Luttrells Yorkshire folk?"

"No, sir, not one of the old families, that is. People say that his lordship's father came from Ireland, and

took up wool-spinning in Bradford. He made a great fortune, and bought the Mountford estate. That's how he got the title."

"Most probably. Nowadays, I understand, you buy the title. Do you know who owned the Castle?"

"One of the Slingsbys, a great racing man and fox hunter."

"Are there any Seatons or de Lancys in this neighbourhood?"

"That same Slingsby married a Miss Seaton. I've never heard tell of the other name, sir."

"Any Aylmers round here?"

"Not now, sir, but there's an old man named Barker, who lives in the town, says that if everybody had their rights you might well be the Lord of Montfort."

"Good gracious! Where is this Barker? I must run to him."

Mrs. Jackson laughed. She was very fond of her young lodger, and was beginning to understand some of his quips.

"Owd Barker, as the folk call him, is over ninety, but he's a great hand at history. He was saying to my husband the other evenin' that ages ago a Sir Richard Aylmer overthrew all the other knights in a tournament held on the meadows outside, and caught on his spear a chaplet of flowers thrown to him from the castle walls by Lady Elisabeth de Montfort. The knight was no fool, either, even though his talk was a bit rough, because he cried out:— 'That makes me your man, miladi, so with a ring, an' you be willing, I'll make you my woman.' He did, an' all."

"So ho!" cried Aylmer. "I must hie me to Barker forthwith!"

He made off, and Mrs. Jackson rejoined the ex-sergeant of foot, who was sorting out a consignment of picture post-

cards for which he foresaw a good demand during the Pageant week.

Every woman, no matter what her age, is either an active or potential match-maker. Mrs. Jackson proceeded now to catechise her husband.

"Robert," she said, "d'ye think Mr. Aylmer is well-to-do?"

"How should I know, wife?" said Jackson. "He's very free with his money, and he's doin' finely with those drawings of his, he tells me."

"Is he of good family?"

"He's a gentleman, every inch of him."

"Is Lady Betty engaged yet to Lord Francis?"

"My! You're full of questions to-day. The engagement is on the cards, but won't be announced, they say, till after the Pageant."

"Well, well," sighed his spouse. "I like Mr. Aylmer, and I don't like Lord Francis."

"Why, woman, what bee have you gotten in your bonnet now?"

"No bee. Just a notion. Couldn't you have dropped with surprise when the old lord came hob-nobbin' here with him last night, sittin' down to dinner as cosy as you like, and drinkin' two bottles of your beer, an' all?"

"I was main glad to see him, after the chatter there was last week. My! To hear folk talkin' in the town you'd think Mr. Aylmer was bustin' up the whole show by not goin' to the rehearsals."

"P'raps he was."

"Now, look here! What d'ye mean?"

"I hear things as well as you, Robert. Our Emmie (a niece) is engaged, as you know, to one of the footmen at the Lodge, and he says Lord Francis couldn't hold a candle to Mr. Aylmer the night of the dinner-party. He

was just the smartest young gentleman there, an' Lady Betty thought so, too."

"What rubbish! Did Lady Betty take Johnny Hobbs into her confidence?"

"Robert, you know better. How often have you picked up bits of news in the mess, which came out correct enough long afterwards? Servants see more than their masters and mistresses ever imagine. You mark my words—if Mr. Aylmer doesn't fly away again in one of his tantrums, Lord Francis can whistle for Lady Betty for many a day after the Pageant, and even then not get her!"

Mrs. Jackson went to her kitchen, but the ex-sergeant only shook his head.

"Women are queer," he muttered, "dashed queer! There's no knowing what they'll say or do from one minute's end to another."

Then he chuckled.

"Lady Betty—Mr. Aylmer! Did'ye ever? My old woman must be goin' off her nut. Yet, she's generally right. . . . Dash my wig, I've gone an' mixed the Donjon Keep with the Angel Yard. . . . Comin' here with her Johnnie Hobbs yarns!"

CHAPTER VIII

A BUSY DAY

MEANWHILE, Aylmer was interviewing Owd Barker. He had no difficulty in finding him. Everyone in Mountford was proud of its oldest inhabitant. Was he not a living witness to the town's exceeding healthiness? But Yorkshire, as a rule, does not "entertain angels unawares," and Barker was no exception among his people. He objected also to strangers regarding him as a phenomenon.

"Drat your impidence!" he would say wrathfully. "Ah'm nobbut ninety-fowr next Martinmas, an' good for another ten year yet!"

Aylmer found him leaning against a door-post of his cottage, and smoking a clay pipe.

"You're not Mr. Barker, I suppose?" began the artist.

"Ain't Ah? Then whëa is?"

The old man was not prepared for this negative form of address. It startled him out of the curt "Ay" ready on his lips.

"But I am searching for a man aged over ninety, whereas you look about sixty-five," said Aylmer, who had not roamed the North-country dales without learning some of the ways of the dwellers therein.

Though Barker smiled, he was remarkably keen-witted withal.

"You'll be wantin' summat, Ah'm thinkin', mister," he said.

"Nothing in particular, except to thank Mr. Barker for bearing out my statement to Lord Mountford that there used to be a well in the middle ward of the Castle."

"Oah. Is *that* it? Ay, ya day we had a bit crack

aboot yon well. But wheer did you hear on't, yoong man?"

"There was always a well in the most protected part of every Norman fortress," said Aylmer, "and I seem to know the old place thoroughly, because I live there."

Barker eyed him keenly then.

"Happen ye'll be t'artist-chap there's bin sae mich clack aboot? Ay, te be sure. Coom thy ways in, sir. T'föalk say ye dëan't give a damn for annybody, an' Ah've felt like that mesen (myself) this monny a year. There's a canny lot o' fëals (fools) i't' wu'ld, an' they're hard te put up wiv' at tahmes."

Good relations as between kindred spirits having been thus established, Aylmer was free to draw on the old man's store of reminiscences, eked out, as they were, by a most retentive memory of things he had heard and read. It was certainly surprising to learn that some long-forgotten antiquary had contributed to a fifty-year-old number of the "Yorkshire Miscellany" an article on Montfort which told the story of the jilting of Margaret Bruce by a Sieur de Lancy, an ungallant wooer afterwards overthrown in the lists when the hand of the fair Elisabeth de Montfort was the victor's guerdon. Incidentally, the King of England thus averted a civil war among his Northern subjects. As it happened, however, the lady's hand only followed her heart, which had been bestowed already on the successful knight, Sir Richard Aylmer. Possibly, the King was aware of all the facts long before he announced the Tournay.

"Noo ye ken why Ah'm main glad to see ye, Mister Aylmer," said Barker. "Atween you an' me, Ah'm gettin' on a bit, an' Ah find mesen livin' more an' more iv' those good owd days, when a hefty chap who could swing a sword or thrust wi' a pike was w'uth a score o't'lawyers

an' parsons who talk big nooadays. Of course, it's all foolishness, but it's a queer thing that when another young lady, the daughter of the man who would ha' owned Montfort in his turn—he lies somewhere in France, poor fellow—is to be Queen of the Tourament, there should happen along another Richard Aylmer to make a stir i't' town. . . . Ye'll not be fightin' Lord Francis for the prize, I reckon?"

Barker's eyes twinkled gleefully. Like Mrs. Jackson, he had probably heard some bits of gossip from Lodge and Pageant field.

Aylmer was not perplexed by the sudden change in the old fellow's speech. Yorkshire is bi-lingual, but often conceals the fact.

"No," he said. "I'm—I'm not a fighting man."

"Ay, so they say," was the dry comment.

For no definite reason, Aylmer felt slightly nettled.

"At any rate," he went on, "I would not care to use a make-believe lance when riding a tilt in full armour. If I tackled the contest at all I'd give or take an honest jab."

Barker was opposed to that notion.

"Nay," he said, shaking his head, "it 'ud be ill deed if somebody got killed in their play-actin'. There was summat o't' söart when Ah was a lad at a plëace called Eglinton, an' you nivver heerd sike a row as sprang up when soom o't'hard-riding young sparks got their heads bruk an' ribs bent. Nay, nay! We'll hae nëan o' that i' Mountford. There's ower monny of oor poor boys lëamed by that damned war as it is."

Probably, that last sentence was a red herring drawn across the trail. Barker was aware of his visitor's outspoken condemnation of war as organised murder, and wished to get at the truth of it. But Aylmer's mind was occupied with other matters. Why did certain stupid

people assume, because he hated bloodshed, that he had not served his country in the field?

"Your argument would put a stop to all our best sports, Mr. Barker," he said. "If one were mounted on a good horse, and well protected by metal of proof, I see no more risk in a clash with blunt lances than one takes every day in riding to hounds. I am of the opinion well phrased by an Australian poet, Adam Lindsay Gordon, when he wrote:—

> There never was game that was worth a rap
> For a rational man to play,
> Into which no accident, no mishap,
> Could possibly find its way."

Old Barker leaned forward in his chair.

"By gum, he cried, "Ah like that. Say it again, mister."

Aylmer repeated the words slowly.

"Deng me!" exclaimed the old man. "Ah nivver thowt them Anzacs could write stuff like yon. Well, well, live an' larn, as t'sayin' is."

"Did you ever hear anything of a lady named Rosalind Seaton being mixed up in the history of Montfort?" enquired Aylmer, his thoughts still dwelling on the weird accuracy of his dream.

"Noa. Noo, let me think. Ah've read that nëam somewhere."

"In connection with Mary, Queen o' Scots, perhaps?"

"Ay, that'll be it."

"But the Christian name of that Miss Seaton was Mary."

"You're reet. Ah ken nowt aboot your Rosalind."

Aylmer smiled. His Rosalind! For a second he was back again on the Hitchin road, singing lustily.

"By the way," he said, "will you let me sketch you, Mr. Barker?"

"Sketch me! D'ye mean a fottygraf?"

"No. A drawing, in ink."

"Why, Ah dëant knoa. Ah'll hae nëan o' your fottygrafs. A chap kem here a month sen, an' put me picture i't' newspaper, an' ye nivver seed sike an owd scarecrow as Ah looked."

It was a grudging assent, as near as Yorkshire ever comes to a direct answer. But Barker took readily to being posed in a strong light, and was very pleased with the portrait when finished. He summoned his granddaughter from a neighbour's house that she might admire it, and was obviously delighted when told he would soon figure among the celebrities of the Pageant.

The two parted good friends, though Aylmer little imagined that his visit to the patriarch's cottage would influence his future life more than any other event which had happened since he came to Mountford.

He went on into the town, which wore an unusually animated aspect. Visitors were thronging its streets already. Tents were erected in the gardens of the Angel Hotel and the Black Horse Inn, and people were eating there. A policeman was advising a party of American tourists to secure rooms in Kirbymoorside, a town many miles distant.

"And I'd hurry if I was you," added the man. "There isn't a vacant bed to-night within five miles of Mountford."

Calvert's voice, booming through an open window, drew Aylmer to the Pageant office in the High-street. It had just occurred to him that he ought to secure a place on one of the stands. The Master laughed at the request.

"You're the guy who has boosted this show to the

limit," he cried, "yet you don't know that after I had lifted the roof off at a guinea a throw I could sell 'em now at five. Excuse my Americanisms, but New York and Chicago are here in force already. I'm cajoling a contractor into working night and day at erecting two more stands. Of course, *you're* all right. Lord Mountford will find room for you in his private box."

"I don't want that," put in Aylmer promptly. "I suppose I can hang around with the newspaper men?"

"Well, yes. But, look here, you won't want to work much next week. Why not give us a hand?"

"I'm very sorry, but singing——"

"I know. Why can't you become one of our archers in Lincoln green, and I'll put you in the lists on Friday, where you can see everything?"

"That sounds rather attractive."

Calvert scribbled something on a card.

"Costumes upstairs, first floor on the left," he said.

Aylmer found himself being apologetic to an autocrat from Wardour Street, who protested against Calvert's order as an outrage.

"Wot's e a-thinkin' of?" shrilled this gentleman, a small but quite capable Cockney. "Robin 'Oods are the devil an' all for boots, an' 'ats, an' jerkins! They've all bin given aht a week agow!"

Then he sized up the candidate, and said grudgingly:—

"P'raps I can do you. Wot's yer nyme. . . . 'Op inter that cubicle an' peel. Yuss, the lot. 'Erbert—" this to an assistant. "A Robin 'Ood, Number 7, hextra leg, 40 an' 33."

Aylmer was quickly transformed into a bold forester, and as quickly stripped again, being assured that certain chalk marks would be attended to, and his "parcel" would be ready next day at noon. As he passed into the street

he heard Calvert regretting to a well-dressed person of the squire order that every vacancy in the supernumerary ranks of the Pageant had been filled early in July.

"Like master, like man," he said to himself with a laugh. "I suppose one can't always tell the truth. That poor fellow would be horribly annoyed if he knew I had just been enrolled."

He was debating whether to lunch in the town, and see the sights, for he never failed to find humour in his fellows, or return to the Castle and paint for a couple of hours, when Lady Betty and Pamela Sturton came swinging past in the dogcart. Her ladyship pulled up.

"I hear you are being good again," she said gaily. "If you are really penitent, you can come and eat with us."

"Will that be a sign of genuine contrition?" he enquired.

"Yes. Sit on that parcel. It's only purple velvet for the Queen's Bower. And hold tight, please. This beast is pulling my arms out."

He climbed up beside the groom. At the next corner a motor-cyclist discovered that there were others in the world who took chances as well as he. He swore loudly after a sharp swerve, and Aylmer retorted by crossing his eyes and pulling out the corners of his mouth with the forefinger of each hand, a trick which was regarded as exquisitely funny by the groom and a number of small boys; it seemed to irritate the cyclist in equal measure. He glared so hard over his shoulder that he ran into a fruit barrow.

"That's torn it!" chuckled the groom. "Wait till Mrs. Hodgson is finished with him, an' he'll wish he was dead."

Mrs. Hodgson, who owned the barrow, seemed to be quick on the trigger. A crowd had gathered already.

"What's going on behind there?" demanded Pamela, looking around.

"That fellow whom Lady Betty nearly killed just now has literally upset the apple-cart," said Aylmer.

"I force all motorists to yield my full share of the road, which was made for horses, not for nasty, smelly cars," said Betty Luttrell loftily.

She was good as her word. A little farther on her axle scraped some paint off a Rolls-Royce.

"This drive is giving me quite an appetite," said Aylmer, "though I'm not sure whether I'll lunch at the Lodge or in Paradise."

"Don't be alarmed," said her ladyship. "I can judge distance to half an inch."

"About the depth of that scratch, in fact. The car has stopped, and an elderly gentleman in white spats and a grey hat—to mention his more striking garments only—is now about to measure the wheel-marks."

"Much good may it do him! I was a foot from the centre of the road."

"I'll testify to eleven inches," vowed Aylmer.

It was, therefore, a quite cheerful trio which joined the Earl and Lord Francis Grosmont at luncheon. Aylmer, of course, could not know that anything had gone wrong, but Betty sensed her grandfather's moods so accurately that she was sure the two men had come perilously near a quarrel while she was out. Aylmer was on his way back to the town and the Pageant field before the girl learnt what was the matter. It seemed that Lord Francis, who had never forgiven the caustic critic of his airmanship, ventured not only to disapprove of the Earl's friendship with the artist, but went so far as to suggest he should be requested to leave the Castle, on the ground that every available room there would be most useful during the coming week.

Lord Mountford had refused curtly to do any such

thing; unfortunately, not content with that, he pointed out, what was undoubtedly true, that Aylmer's drawings had given the Pageant a publicity which would now make it a great success.

"I cannot guess why you have taken such a dislike to that young fellow," he went on. "He's a gentleman, and by way of being a genius, I think. It was a piece of real good fortune that he came here. He has converted a purely local event into an affair of national importance."

"Oh, he's clever enough, I admit," grumbled Grosmont, rendered pertinacious by annoyance. "For all that, I distrust him. He is not one of us. If the Pageant crowd didn't regard him as cracked he'd have been ducked in the river long since."

"Ducked! What for?"

"Perhaps you have never heard him spouting his views, sir. He's a regular Bolshevist! Even Betty found that out, and will have nothing to do with him."

"So it would seem," said the older man, drily.

He was looking through the library window, and saw the dog-cart swing into view from behind a clump of elms. Lord Francis looked, too. He flushed angrily, and left the room. He was in the unhappy plight of the man who falls between two stools, presumably three-legged ones, which upset easily. If he met Aylmer now with a hypocritical smile the Earl would certainly be sarcastic at his expense later, yet he could not be positively rude to a fellow-guest. So he absented himself from the luncheon-table until the others were seated, and tossed Aylmer an off-handed nod when he came in.

"Hello!" he said, affecting an indifference he was far from feeling, "I thought you had gone away."

"No, indeed," came the pleasant answer. "I have just

joined your noble company of players. On Tuesday you will see me in a quite striking costume."

"Are you riding in the mêlée?"

"Oh, I'm not seeking knightly rank. I have become an archer—a sort of usher in Lincoln green, I take it."

"Sorry. Calvert was saying this morning that some of the mounted warriors had developed cold feet, so I thought you might be a new recruit. But, perhaps, you don't ride?"

"I think I could remain in one of those peaked saddles if held in by a hundredweight of boiler-plate."

"Then why not volunteer? There will be quite a nice little scrap on the Friday afternoon."

"No, thanks," said Aylmer simply. "I'm measured for my new suit now. Moreover, I dislike the mere semblance of sword-play."

Lord Francis smiled then, and Lady Betty flushed, though she could not for the life of her understand the sardonic grin with which her grandfather surveyed her prospective fiancé.

"I suppose you regard the pen as the mightier weapon?" she said, after shooting a glance at "Frankie" which kept him quiet for many minutes.

"At any rate, it is the only one I can use," replied Aylmer. He, of course, appreciated the cause of the Earl's amused expression, and dreaded the outcome if Grosmont's clumsy baiting did not cease.

Relief came, however, from a wholly unexpected quarter. A footman appeared with a note.

"A policeman on a bicycle brought this, my lord," he said, "and wishes to know if he is to wait for an answer."

"Pardon me; there may be a special sitting of the bench," said the Earl. "We shall be obliged to grant

some occasional licenses owing to the crowds which will turn up next week."

But his face soon showed that the letter dealt with an altogether different matter.

"Tell the constable that I'll come and see Colonel Todd-Lane in about an hour," he said. Then he re-adjusted his glasses, and looked at his grand-daughter.

"I think I ought to read this aloud," he went on. The text of the letter was as follows:—

Dear Lord Mountford:—

A few minutes ago I was being driven into the town in my car when Lady Betty Luttrell nearly caused a bad accident by her careless handling of a somewhat spirited horse in a dog-cart. My chauffeur, a most trustworthy driver, gave her ladyship far more than her half of the road, but although he swung away quickly when a collision was imminent, the axle of the dog-cart cut a deep dent in the off-side panel of my Rolls-Royce. Knowing you and your grand-daughter as I do, I would not have mentioned the matter at all if I had not been stopped by a crowd assembled at the bend in the High-street opposite the Town Hall. On inquiry I ascertained that a motor-cyclist was compelled by her ladyship's reckless driving to crash into a fruit barrow, and the resultant uproar blocked the street so completely that I have missed my train to Pickering. In the conditions, I feel it a public duty to bring the matter to your notice. I am, Yours faithfully,

E. DE C. TODD-LANE., *Lt. Col.*

"The black-hearted and white-spatted old sinner!" cried Aylmer instantly. "His car and the dog-cart divided the road to an inch, and the other fellow would have cleared the barrow by yards if he hadn't been craning his neck to look at me. I should explain, by the way, that I made a face at him, which he deserved, on account of the language he used."

The Earl laughed.

"I'll smooth over old Todd-Lane," he said. "But was this motor-cyclist hurt?"

"Not in the least."

"Then why should our city be in such a turmoil that the Colonel could not get through to the station?"

"Oh, I believe a Mrs. Hodgson, who owned the barrow, would attend to that."

"By Jove, she certainly would! That woman is a terror. . . . Betty, you bad girl, one of these days I, as chairman of the bench of magistrates, will have to send you to jail for furious driving."

"What I want to know is the sort of face Mr. Aylmer made," said Pamela.

"It was a grotesque, based on the principles of a Japanese mask," said Aylmer.

"Oh, do show me!"

"I'll draw it for you after luncheon. Like all really great inventions, its effect is attained by the simplest means."

"But why should Colonel Todd-Lane send his note by a policeman?" demanded Betty.

"Because he is a magistrate, too," said the Earl.

"How much does a dent in a Rolls-Royce cost, old thing?"

"Leave that to me. The Colonel's temper suffered most, I imagine."

"I do wish I had heard what Mrs. Hodgson said," commented Pamela thoughtfully.

"I must try and sick her on to the gallant Todd-Lane," said Betty. "She is quite a pal of mine since I saved her son from being prosecuted for poaching."

"Thank goodness, you are all off to Scotland on the 11th!" cried the Earl. "Mr. Aylmer, do you shoot or fish? Why not come here when these fire-brands have

departed? We can walk up the grouse on my small moor, and there should be some good salmon in the Slee."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I must be in London as soon as the Pageant ends," was the hesitating reply.

In this atmosphere of country life and its many forms of sport he felt the absurdity of pleading that he could not bring himself to kill any creature of the wild. In his walks across the moors he had often disturbed a pack of grouse, whose startled chuckles and noisy flight invariably recalled the sights and sounds of an aviation field. Peering into some quiet pool of a woodland stream, too, he would watch the quick smooth motion of trout, and often find himself speculating as to whether the rigidity of an aeroplane might not be lessened with safety. Suppose it were flexible—allowed to diminish strain by reducing resistance—what a wonderful thing it would be! At any rate, one did not want to slay these masterpieces of nature. His personal needs did not demand their immediate slaughter for food; let them live, then, in the freedom he sought for himself!

His mind must have wandered off into some such quaint conceit, because he was aroused by Lady Betty saying:—

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Aylmer!"

"They have no value," he answered. "I was really thinking that the problems of flight will be solved in the study rather than the air. There is no actual mystery in these things. They are contained in closed books—that is all—just like the apparently insoluble hieroglyphics of Egypt. A Frenchman happened to notice that a cartouche, or rectangular border, surrounded some few of the eagles, suns, snakes and lions, and that the signs thus italicised, as it were, corresponded with the recurring name of a King in a Greek inscription which was probably a

translation of the Egyptian symbols. And, behold! The sealed volume opened at the right page!"

"Have you ever been in Egypt?" enquired Lord Francis suddenly.

"No. I am afraid of being bitten by a scarab. Or, imagine the horror of being swallowed by a sarcophagus!"

Three people laughed, but "Frankie" sulked again. He had seen most of his war service during the advance on Jerusalem, and was convinced now that this mad artist, by a silly joke, had purposely shut him out from sharing in the conversation.

When the meal was ended, Aylmer kept his promise as to the sketch, which developed into an excellent caricature of himself. He had never before attempted the grotesque. It was as though a new field of endeavour and good achievement opened before his eyes. He said nothing of this to the two girls, but was rather silent when Lord Mountford took him into the town.

"I hope to find Todd-Lane in the office of the magistrates' clerk," said the Earl. "If he is not there he may be catching the 3:10 train to Pickering. I shall be detained, so perhaps you will do me the favour of going on to the station, finding the Colonel, if in the train, and telling him I shall seize the first opportunity of apologising for Betty's madcap conduct. I would have asked that ass, Grosmont, to hunt him, but he might only pour oil on the fire. Are you going to the Castle afterwards?"

"Yes. It is a pity to waste all this sunshine."

"Tell the chauffeur to take you there, and to wait for me at the Town Hall."

As it happened, Aylmer had never before entered the railway station at Mountford. It lay behind the trees which sheltered the Pageant ground from the keen winds of the north and east, and was approached from the

town by a side street. The line was a single one, and the station a terminus, so the same engine and carriages went back and forth five times daily to a junction some miles distant. Usually, the train came in, the engine was reversed, and the outward journey began in ten minutes.

Aylmer learnt afterwards that the irate Colonel had driven to Pickering in the scarified Rolls-Royce, so he could not be in either Town Hall or station. A train arrived just as the car stopped, and Aylmer stood on one side to allow a stream of passengers to pass. He watched them idly. They were mostly country people, among others, Tommy Trenholme, who gave him a cheery nod of recognition.

Then came that illustrious maestro, Signor Benvenuto Cellini!

His bizarre personality impinged on Aylmer's startled vision as a complete colour scheme. Red-ribboned straw hat, brown velvet coat, brown trousers, socks and boots, swarthy face and black violin-case—even the yellow silk shirt and collar—all these vivid tints formed a harmonious whole, much as the component hues revealed by spectrum analysis blend into a single ray of light when the prism is withdrawn.

He did not see Aylmer, because he half turned at the exit to indicate Lord Mountford's car with a fine sweep of his right arm.

"Did I not tell you we had chosen aright?" he said. "His lordship has sent his Rolls for us. How kind! How thoughtful!"

Aylmer, quite involuntarily, had withdrawn behind a pillar, as the station approach had a portico as a shelter for foot-passengers. Luckily, the chauffeur's British phlegm was proof against Cellini's humour, its seeming accuracy being due to mere chance, since a glance at the

Wandering Minstrels showed the wild improbability of such a gang being the Earl's guests. Out they trooped, two girls and a man, the latter carrying a banjo. Aylmer gave one quick look at the girls before diving into the booking-office. They were not Rosalind and Celia, thank goodness! but a pair of pierrettes. The man, too, bore the hall-marks of the stage. Evidently, Cellini had re-organised his party on a businesslike basis.

A porter followed with an array of dress baskets and leather bags, but there was no vehicle available, while it was more than likely the official assured the travellers that no accommodation whatsoever could be had in the town. Aylmer dodged to a bookstall when the banjoist re-entered the station to lodge the baggage in the parcels office. Then the four walked off towards the High-street, since people marooned in this way seldom or never believe that they will not be more fortunate than others.

Aylmer was now free to escape, had he chosen. By this time, however, the first shock of Cellini's unexpected arrival had passed, and he decided to stalk the newcomers at a distance, being consumed with curiosity as to what would become of them. He dismissed the car, therefore, and was able to approach quite near the quartette in the crowded High-street without fear of being recognised. In due course, like every other citizen in difficulties, whether sage or mountebank, Cellini interviewed a policeman, whose mere attitude, with thumbs tucked in waist-belt, was eloquent. No; there wasn't even a stable-loft vacant in Mountford; hundreds had gone away already by train and car—been going for days, in fact. The last train for York left at seven o'clock. The neighbouring villages were just as packed. Kirbymoorside might harbour four more, but he doubted it.

Aylmer knew exactly what the man was saying, because

the four people drew away and stood in a disconsolate knot. Here was an unforeseen barrier which not even Cellini's mental agility might leap. Who would have guessed that a Pageant held in a remote moorland town would prove such an attraction? And how sing till ten at night if they could neither leave the place nor sleep in it?

But Cellini might well have faith in his star. At the moment when the outlook was blackest his favourable planet must have swung above the horizon. Aylmer, always swayed by impulse to help rather than hinder the fortunes of others, gave way to a sudden conviction that he was acting rather meanly. Here was Cellini, who, after a brief wayside acquaintance, had behaved with singular generosity at Wheathampstead, and, to say nothing of the other man, here were two girls, looking white and forlorn, as well they might, having just ended a long, hot journey from Leeds, yet a brother artist, who regarded himself as under some financial obligation to one of them, was holding aloof and not lifting a finger to soothe their distress.

The reproach was not to be borne. He advanced with swift strides, taking Cellini unaware—a flank attack, so to speak.

"Maestro," he cried joyously, "welcome to our revels!"

The fiddler spun round.

"Julius Cæsar!" he vowed, with such additional emphasis that the girls stared.

"None other, my friend," said Aylmer, and they shook hands. "But what tempest has blown you hither?"

"Ask no questions now, dear youth. If you are at home in this impossible town—an ancient pint-pot which apes at holding a gallon—tell me where these ladies can rest their weary heads this evening. As for Mr. Mannering

and myself, we can surely buy a truss of straw and spread it in a cow-byre."

They were within a few yards of the Town Hall, and the presence of Lord Mountford's car showed that the Earl was yet in the building. Aylmer was nothing if not whole-hearted.

"Don't stir from this spot till I return," he said.

Soon he had obtained audience of his lordship at the door of a room marked "Private—Magistrates Only." First he explained that Colonel Todd-Lane had not travelled by the 3:10, and then he spoke of the plight of four musicians, one a really great artist and personal friend, whose performances would be an acquisition to the town during the Pageant—would the Earl have any objection to their being lodged in the Castle, in tents, or in such manner as Sergeant Jackson and his wife might devise?

Objection?—not the slightest. Where were they? Run 'em there in the car, as he, the Earl, would be engaged here another half hour or more. Some bigoted teetotallers on the bench were quibbling about the occasional licenses, and had to be argued down.

So, to the amazement of the chauffeur, and even of Cellini himself, the nondescript crowd were driven to the Castle gate in the Rolls-Royce. They were on the causeway before Aylmer solved a problem which was absorbing his thoughts so thoroughly that he hardly heard Cellini's babble of talk or the more restrained if quite as earnest gratitude of the others.

He had not seen this man since a day in June, yet he certainly had met him more recently. The cautious progress of the car over the rough embanked road brought vivid enlightenment. The last time he set eyes on the violinist's dark and saturnine visage it was scowling at him from the helmet of the Sieur Guilbert de Lancy!

CHAPTER IX

CELLINI CREATES A SENSATION

SERGEANT JACKSON was dubious, Mrs. Jackson rather breathless, when faced with such an addition to their household. Lord Mountford's wish, however, was almost a law unto these old retainers, so a discussion of ways and means was left until the travellers had been refreshed by soap and water, and an ample "tea," of the true Yorkshire variety, was spread in Aylmer's sitting-room. Two casement windows gave an uninterrupted view down the valley of the Slee, which Cellini surveyed in silence for a few minutes. Neither he nor his host alluded to events at Wheathampstead in the presence of the others.

Aylmer, at any rate, gave little thought to those hours of Bohemianism. The strange discovery that Cellini resembled Sir Guilbert de Lancy so closely that he might have been the man himself ten years older was so perplexing that he could not help dwelling on it. Why had he not remembered? Lady Betty and Rosalind had fitted quite naturally into the characters of two Norman ladies of the dim past—how came it that he had not recalled this equally striking likeness?

Cellini saw the puzzlement in his eyes, and promptly attributed it to the worry of the hour.

"Don't bother your head about us," he said, turning from the window. "There are shops in the town, and we have money. Here are, not four walls, but fifty, and a burst of settled weather which bids defiance to our British climate. Leave Mannering and me to arrange matters with our excellent Sergeant and his dear old Dutch, who should never be allowed to die while she can bake such cakes. . . . But tell me, fair youth, how come you to live

in a Castle, even though it be slightly out of repair? Were you on hobnobbing terms with its noble owner?"

"I drifted here by idle chance," said Aylmer, "fell in with the Pageant folk, and the rest followed almost as a matter of course."

"Are you the Mr. Aylmer who drew the pictures which everybody is talking about?" put in one of the girls.

"I have certainly done some Tournament and Pageant sketches which have been published, but I can hardly claim such notoriety for them."

"Oh, they've made quite a hit. There is a piece about you in one of the papers this morning. I little thought I should be having tea with you this afternoon."

"Julius Cæsar is, and always has been, a great man," said Cellini. "Don't you realise, by this time, that I consort with none other?"

"Why do you call Mr. Aylmer Julius Cæsar?" came the amused question. "Is he—did he——?"

"Once in the dear dead days beyond recall we shared a midsummer night's frolic," explained Cellini, anticipating her question. "I think of him as Cæsar, not as a haughty Norman, because we paced a famous Roman road together. But I must forget such fantasies here, where he consorts with the great ones of earth. . . . This place is Montfort, I believe, Richard?"

"Yes. It has retained the Norman name."

"Then the man who christened the town Mountford should be boiled in oil. Call the roll of the local celebrities."

"The Earl, of course; his granddaughter, Lady Betty Luttrell, and her friend, Pamela Sturton; the Marchioness of Castleton and her second son, Lord Francis Grosmont —there must be others in that family, but I have not met them. Then we have a sprinkling of army men, and some

squires, but I know them best in their historical characters, which are drawn from practically the whole of our English history. They're a very decent crowd, and treat me better than I deserve."

"But the paper said—" broke in the girl again, only to have her enthusiasm quelched by Cellini.

"You should never read newspapers, my dear," he admonished her. "Their politics will addle your immature brain, and their gloating over crime furrow your smooth brow . . . Mannering, if you stuff yourself with pastry your voice will crack on that A flat in *'E lucevan le stelle'* which I have taught you with almost heart-rending effort. . . . Richard, you and I will smoke in the court while these infants gorge."

Thus Aylmer did not learn what a London paragrapher had said about him. It was as well, perhaps. He would hear of it quite soon enough for his peace of mind.

Once apart from inquisitive ears, Cellini's manner changed. For him, he became quite serious.

"I won't ask you why you fled from Wheathampstead," he said, "though you may be interested to hear that you broke up a far better musical combination than that which I have secured now. Rosalind and Celia were white-faced and disconsolate at breakfast next morning, and treated me with cold contumely. In fact, they sped away on their bicycles at nine o'clock, and I have no further news of them. These people are professionals whom I picked up in Peterborough. I'm just licking them into shape. Mannering, who doesn't even know his own language, believed that *'La donna e mobile'* was a comic song. His first efforts were so exquisitely ludicrous that I was tempted to let him carry on. The girls, too, want to dance, but are calming down, because they earn twice the money with me they would get on the sands at Yarmouth

or Margate. We have sung our way North with fair success. When I heard at York of this Pageant I decided to stay here a week, as we should secure some private engagements. And now, what of your own adventures? . . . But, first, let me discharge my debt."

He produced a well-filled pocket-book, placed it on the garden seat around the oak, and counted out twelve pound notes, which he crammed into Aylmer's breast pocket.

"The proceeds to date of a tuppenny royalty on that justly popular lyric and melody 'The Song of the Telegraph Wire,' " he cried. "It has gone like Mrs. Jackson's hot cakes. Don't be alarmed! Your dignity does not suffer. It bears the legend:—'Written by Julius Cæsar and composed by Benvenuto Cellini.' The queer combination of names is helpful. It evokes curiosity, while every human being of adult age is convinced that he or she has trod the Great North Road. We may make a few hundreds out of it if the publisher is reasonably honest. . . . Propound, therefore."

Aylmer knew that his strange friend would be annoyed if the fairness of this division of profits were questioned. Moreover, the really dominant thought in his mind was Cellini's uncanny similarity to the Sieur de Lancy. It literally did not occur to him until much later that in each and every instance his strained senses had merely fitted an ancient garb on to some modern prototype.

"Would you mind telling me your name?" he said.

Cellini, for once in his life, was taken aback. Evidently the question was quite unexpected. He stiffened perceptibly, and seemed to guard his words.

"You have some reason for asking me that now?" he inquired.

"Yes—two reasons. In the first instance, you will be

meeting a lot of people here of your own social rank. Secondly, I had a queer sort of dream, or vision, last night, in which you figured as a Norman baron, a Sieur Guilbert de Lancy."

Cellini's swarthy features twitched curiously.

"Are you indulging in the harmless amusement of pulling my leg?" he said.

"No. I don't know how to express myself more plainly."

"Then I'll try and be equally clear. I lost my name when I took to fiddling for a living. Nothing unusual in that, is there? People on the stage are often christened afresh in the temple of Thespis. As for your bold Norman, I would not vouch for any of my ancestors except my mother."

"I'm sorry," commented Aylmer simply. If his friend chose to remain anonymous there was nothing more to be said.

Cellini lighted a cigarette.

"The villain always smokes at such tense moments," he chuckled. "But you, Richard—you have no lurid past to cloak in clouds of Turkish tobacco. If you have no story to tell you can at least resolve my doubts on one point. I hope I am not causing you any worry by turning up in this casual way?"

"My dear fellow, I'm delighted to see you."

"That's good. You may wish to know that I have never so much as mentioned Rosalind or Celia to the new members of the company."

"I'm glad of that. I don't know why I say it, but our meeting with those two girls figures in my mind as something out of the common. I find myself thinking of Rosalind rather frequently. She is becoming idealised."

"Poor Rosalind! No woman can stand that."

Aylmer laughed.

"I wish I had a share of your cynicism," he said. "Unfortunately, I go to the other extreme. If you are not too tired, come and look over my domain."

They climbed to the keep by way of the Grand Escalier. Aylmer explained the plan of the castle as they went, and his companion listened with just the right air of interest. In a quarter of an hour Cellini was not only well posted in the true inwardness of life in a Norman fortress but had obtained a few shrewdly accurate glimpses of Aylmer's fortunes during the past month.

Then Mannering came, and the three went to the town, where camp beds and blankets were hired, and delivered at the Castle, together with the baggage from the railway station. Aylmer gave up his bedroom for the use of the girls; the three men were accommodated in the guardroom, where the bedding could be piled out of the way each morning.

That night the "Wandering Minstrels" gave a performance in front of the Town Hall, where the High-street widened to permit of an open-air market on Saturdays. They drew a most appreciative audience, but Aylmer remained away. He dreaded the lure of Cellini's fiddle, so he dipped into a book—some modern and wholly unromantic novel—while the quartette was winning the plaudits of music-loving if critical Yorkshire.

It happened that Major Randolph, whose house lay a full mile from Mountford, strolled into the town that evening to call on an old friend who had arrived during the day with a party from London. Randolph had reserved rooms for them at the Black Horse Hotel weeks in advance, and he saw to it that the landlord's notions as to the law of contracts should not be weakened by the lavish offers of late comers. He was held for a few minutes by

the strains of a selection from "Carmen" exquisitely played by Cellini, while the girls, tastefully attired as pierrettes, made the first collection.

Cellini wore his own bizarre costume, but something in the set of his shoulders and graceful attitude seemed to arouse a furtive suspicion in the soldier's mind, and he edged through the crowd in order to obtain a better view of the musician's face. In doing so, he ran into his friend, Tommy Trenholme, who could generally be relied on to know the ins and outs of local matters.

"Hello!" he said. "*You* here? What troupe is this?"

"They call themselves the Wanntherin' Minsthrels, major. They kem in by the afternoon thrain. I spotted 'em fust at Malton."

"I suppose you haven't heard the name of the man playing the violin?"

"Oah, yes. He tellt us. It soonded like I-talian, and I could mek nowt on 't. But, by gum, he c'n play. He can, an' all."

"They are lucky people if they found accommodation here for the night."

"They were a dashed sight luckier in bein' friends o' Mr. Aylmer. He got 'em permission te have some beds put up i' t' Castle."

"Mr. Aylmer!"

"Ay. He did, an' all."

Cellini, dashing into the famous march, swung round, and came under the glare of a street lamp. Randolph swore in the manner of the army in Flanders, and his features contracted so strangely that Trenholme thought he was ill.

"What's t' matter, major?" came the anxious demand. "Is owt wrang wi' ye?"

"No, no. A twinge of gout. I was standing awkwardly. How long is this concert going on?"

"Yon fiddler chap said a few minnits sen that Part Two would follow t' collection."

"Ah! Goodnight, Trenholme! I have to meet some friends staying at the Black Horse."

"Fower gentlemen whëa kem frae Lunnon to-day?"

"Yes."

"They're here wi' t' rest. They're ower yonder."

Following the direction of Trenholme's thrust-out chin, Randolph saw a group of men in dinner jackets. Three were close together, while one had drawn somewhat apart, being apparently rapt into abstraction by the music. But he woke up when Randolph appeared, and held out his hand, though his strongly-marked, clean-cut face did not show even the ghost of a welcoming smile. Indeed, his expression was a blend of anxiety and annoyance.

"Hello, Jim!" he said.

"Hello, Claude!" was the answer. "You have recognised him, then?"

"It is either he or the devil."

"A dual personality, I fear. I believed him dead long since."

"We allowed you to think so. We thought it better."

During some minutes thereafter neither man spoke. Sir Claude Berkeley's companions realised that that distinguished diplomat was perturbed. They could not guess why, but left him alone, wondering, no doubt, why he and the tall, elderly soldier who had joined him looked so grave.

When the applause which rewarded Cellini's solo had died down the impresario announced the next item.

"Signorina Lucia Manchinello will now sing *'O Bella Napoli,'*" he said.

"That settles it!" growled Randolph. "I would know his voice anywhere."

"What are you going to do about it?" muttered Sir Claude.

"I can't tell—yet. This thing has come on me too suddenly. Wait till I have spoken to him."

"Jim, what's the use? Don't be an idiot! That wretched business was settled twelve years ago."

"Apparently, it was not. But I'm not going to drag you into any further trouble."

"You wouldn't have said that if you were not horribly upset. Take my tip and sleep on it, old chap. Come into the hotel. Let me introduce you——"

"For Heaven's sake, Claude, don't start giving me good advice, or I'll grab him now. If you leave me alone I'll hold off till the show is over, and thus try to avoid an open scandal, at any rate."

"Well, it will help you to regain your senses if you have a word with these other fellows. I'll send 'em off at the right moment. I promise."

"Keep out of this, Claude."

"I absolutely refuse to do any such thing. I'll see you through this night if I have to call on the police for assistance."

So, during the next half hour or more, Randolph exchanged chatty comments on the concert and the Pageant with Sir Claude's friends, who were not surprised, however, when Berkeley said, after the final encore, that Randolph and he would join them a little later. They sensed some disturbance of Sir Claude's poise, apparently the outcome of his meeting with a crony of former days in the Near East.

The crowd was breaking up, and the four minstrels were almost clear of the town when Berkeley, begging the

other to hold back for a minute, quickened his pace and called to Cellini. There was a lamp at the place, which chanced to be at the Castle end of the bridge across the Slee. It was not surprising that the musician took the tall, portly gentleman in evening dress for a prospective patron.

He was soon undeceived, however.

"Will you oblige me by sending on the other members of your party?" said Sir Claude, in a low tone. "A man you know wishes to discuss matters with you."

The request was phrased peculiarly. At any other time it would have evoked a humorous and perhaps sarcastic retort. But some chord of memory twanged in Cellini's brain. He looked sharply at the stranger—as yet he had not noticed Randolph—so contented himself, at first, by asking Mr. Mannering to escort the ladies to the Castle, while he would follow immediately. Then he turned, halted a pace or two from Sir Claude, and said quizzically:—

" 'Discussing matters' is a term of wide significance. Are your interests imperial or local?"

"My old friend, Major James Randolph, one-time British attaché at Constantinople, has something to say to you, I believe. Here he is. My name, by the way, is Claude Berkeley."

By this time the three men were standing in a triangle. Cellini was in the shadow. The light of the lamp revealed the expressions on the other men's faces, but they could hardly see the grimace of rage which convulsed Cellini's forehead and lips, and shot baleful menace from his eyes.

"Ah, we are well met!" he snarled. "Do I take it, Major Randolph, that you want to renew a conversation

which was broken off rather abruptly on the shores of the Bosphorus?"

"Nothing on earth would please me more," was the answer. Aylmer, reading and smoking at ease less than two hundred yards away, would never have discerned his friend's pleasant accents in those harsh, grating words.

"When shall it be? Now? I see you have brought your second. He can act for both of us."

Cellini almost spat out each syllable. Whatever the cause of quarrel between these two men, neither showed the least sign of flinching.

"Stop talking nonsense, both of you," muttered Sir Claude, with the cold austerity of a judge. "You have no arms——"

"I have one," scowled Cellini, "the one left me by that fool. It will suffice."

"You must listen to me," went on Sir Claude. "If you two engage in a disgraceful fracas I shall call for help, and have you arrested. I mean it. The police will believe me when I say you are planning a murder. You have fought once, but there will be no more bloodshed if I can prevent it. Now, Randolph, say what you have to say, and have done."

"You and I can decide the personal issue later," said the soldier, closing in so that he might scan Cellini's face. "I was told you were dead——"

"So I am—dead and buried and condemned to everlasting oblivion in so far as the world of other years is concerned. But I'm willing to come to life again if permitted to have another shot at you—or a stab for that matter. I would suggest our bare nails, but I would have the advantage of you there, and not even my enemies ever claimed that I was an unfair fighter."

"I cannot meet you to-night. It would be unjust to

my friend, Sir Claude Berkeley. None must ever know that he has any share in our quarrel. You agree to that?"

"I pledge myself to nothing."

"I think you will. You used to be a gentleman."

"Not even your all-sufficing egotism could rob me of that attribute."

"*Your* egotism permitted you to rob me of my wife."

"By no means. If not I it would have been another."

Randolph uttered an inarticulate sound, half sob, half groan. His frame grew rigid, but he had given his word to Berkeley, and kept it, though his brow glistened with a sudden perspiration under the strain.

"Have you fallen so low that you seek an excuse by defaming the woman whom you led away?" he said in a tense whisper.

"No. It is you who are still in the clouds, my *beau sabreur*," came the scoffing reply. "Come, then! It is time you heard the truth. If you have no worthier purpose in seeking me to-night, I take it you want to know what became of the lady who ruined *my* life, at any rate, if not *yours*. She left me as soon as she discovered that I was a broken man, maimed and poverty-stricken. I tried to save her, but she cast me off in New York as readily as she freed herself of you in Constantinople. She was a cold-hearted schemer. You, it would appear, never grasped that essential fact. I discovered it to my cost when she had done me all the mischief a woman can do to her lover. Anyhow, she is dead. She fell overboard one dark night from a yacht in Long Island Sound—fell, or was thrown—I neither know nor care. There can be no mistake. Her body was found and identified, and she was buried under your name—Helena Randolph, wife of Captain James Randolph, of the British Army—that is

how the inscription on her tomb reads. I have stood beside her grave."

"Are you telling the truth?"

"Certainly you have not changed," cried Cellini, with a bitter laugh. "Twelve years ago you were hard to convince. . . . *You* found that, didn't you, Berkeley?"

Sir Claude shirked a direct answer.

"I think," he said, "you two had better part now—for ever."

"That is for the bereaved husband to say," snapped Cellini. "I am here for a week, and here I remain. His high-flown notions cost me a career and a hand. He need not flatter himself that I can be forced to give ground again so easily."

"A hand!" said Randolph, speaking like one in a trance. "That morning in Stamboul I saw you lying on the ground, covered with blood, and to-night you were playing a violin."

"Your bullet shattered my left wrist, and amputation followed. I suppose your friends pretended that I was dead, and thus simplified the settlement with your wife. She did not defend the case, you will remember. She told me herself she would rather take poison than accept your forgiveness. But be under no delusion that I am helpless because one hand is gone. Had you struck me, or at me, just now I would have smashed your face to a pulp with that same left hand, which consists of tempered steel bars."

Randolph turned to his friend.

"Claude," he said, "you owe me some explanation. What did actually happen that day?"

"You were half dazed, old chap, and did not realise that your adversary had not fired. Involuntarily, I suppose, he raised his left arm to shield his breast, and your

bullet caught his wrist at the joint, passing right through, and knocking him down by the sheer force of the blow."

"He never fired, you say?"

"Yes—that is the literal fact. We dared not tell you. You would have suffered a worse agony."

Randolph brushed a hand across his eyes.

"Thank God, I still live!" he said. "I might have gone under in France. Of course," he added, looking at Cellini without any semblance of passion, "I am at your disposal at any time. You have some obligations to your fellow-artists, I suppose, while I am compelled to take part in the Pageant this week. Afterwards, we can cross to Calais, if you care to risk subsequent proceedings. . . . No, I cannot even demand that. But I owe you your chance. Spin a coin now. If I win the toss, we are quits. If I lose, I'll go off the map next Monday."

"Of all the infernal nonsense—" began Sir Claude hotly, but Cellini interrupted him with a curious eagerness.

"I hate deferred sentences," he said. "I accept your terms, Randolph, but on one condition. I give you a coin, you toss, and I call."

"As you will," said the soldier quietly.

"Each of you seems to forget that I shall make it my business to have you both arrested," fumed the diplomat, who began to fear that events were slipping beyond his control.

"Your frantic consideration for our safety comes twelve years too late, Berkeley," said Cellini, producing a penny from his waistcoat pocket, and handing it to the man who was ready to risk his life in this Quixotic manner. "Spin it well!" he went on, with a queer laugh. "Sir Claude will strike a match and tell us which has won."

Randolph threw the coin in the air without a moment's hesitation. It fell in the dust as Cellini cried "Head!"

"Now for a match, Sir Claude!" jeered Cellini.

"I refuse to take any further part in this mad business. I tell you again that——"

"It really doesn't matter which of us decides the point so long as we concur in the verdict," said Randolph. He took a box of matches from his pocket, and in another instant a light flared on the penny. The figure of Britannia with her trident gleamed up at them.

Cellini stooped and picked up the coin.

"So that's settled!" he said. *"E finita la commedia!"*

Sir Claude Berkeley sighed with relief.

"As you have appointed me referee," he said, striving to invest his words with judicial calm, "I state now that this wretched dispute ends for all time."

Randolph, stil holding the match, held it near Cellini's face.

"For my peace of mind please assure me, on your honour, that the statement you made with reference to my poor wife was correct in every particular," he said.

"Absolutely—on my honour," said Cellini.

In their complete absorption none of the three had heard footsteps on the road. They were startled by a cheery hail.

"Hello, major! Hev' ye lost summat?"

It was Tommy Trenholme, making his way homeward.

"Yes, nearly," said Randolph. "But I have found it again."

"By gum, that's lucky! Good evenin', gentlemen. You, mister, with the I-talian name, you can scrape a fiddle all right. You can, an' all."

"Thank you!" said Cellini, with a fine gesture. "I really do believe I have excelled myself this evening.

Unfortunately, you have just missed a marvellous trio, *mezzo voce agitato!*"

He turned on his heel, and strode off toward the Castle, where Sergeant Jackson awaited him with a lantern at the wicket.

"There's a bite of supper ready, sir," said the old man, "and the rest of 'em are wondering what had become of you."

"Too bad that I should have detained a hungry crowd!" complained Cellini. "But you know how it is, sergeant. The people here think me a great musician, which I am not, and some enthusiastic admirers waylaid me to say nice things, to which I listened perforce. Lead on to the banquet!"

Half an hour later he drew Aylmer into the outer court for a final cigarette.

"By the way," he said, affecting to recall a merely trivial incident, "before I went out you asked me to tell you my real name. It was churlish to refuse a perfectly reasonable request. It is Hugh Mountstephen Delancy. Rather odd you should have dreamed of me as a Sieur de Lancy, because I have reason to believe that my Irish progenitors were descended from the Norman de Lancys. Of course, I remain Cellini for professional purposes. Benvenuto was an artist, a rascal, and a bit of a mountebank, and I fear I ape him at times."

CHAPTER X

AN OXFORD-STREET PRELUDE TO THE PAGEANT

EVERY working day in the year some two hundred thousand Londoners throw aside, in trains, omnibuses, restaurants and shops, newspapers for which they have no further use. Occasionally they will discard even more expensive periodicals. Thus, on the Monday afternoon which was the eve of the Mountford Pageant, a lady who had been served by a pretty girl behind the counter of a big drapery store in Oxford-street gathered up her parcel, purse and sunshade, and was about to hurry out when the girl noticed that the customer was forgetting a folded magazine.

"Your paper, madam," she said smilingly.

The lady smiled back.

"You can keep it, if you like," she said. "It's an old number of 'Society in Pictures,' and I have looked through it."

During the next half-minute, perhaps, the shop-assistant's services were not in demand. Almost unconsciously, she opened the well-known weekly journal. It was stitched through the centre, so it spread readily where "Drawings of the Mountford Pageant—by Richard Aylmer" occupied the place of honour on a double page.

She seemed to be fascinated by the headlines, and stared at them fixedly. Moreover, she uttered a queer, choking cry, which caught the alert ear of a floor-walker.

He pounced on the offender with the eagerness of a small-minded man vested in a little brief authority. Rosalind was aware of her fault the instant she caught sight

of the aggressive Cockney, all hands and feet and fluttering coat-tails.

"That's against the rules, Miss Jones, and no one knows it better'n yerself," he snapped.

"I—I'm sorry," faltered the girl. "I wasn't thinking what I was doing."

"Well, don't let it 'appen again. It's a bad hexample for the younger assistants."

Miss Jones meekly threw the paper into a drawer. She realised it was useless to try and snatch another glimpse of it, since the lynx eye of Mr. Tompkins would be on her during the remainder of the day. If she so much as opened that particular drawer to display the assorted tapes it contained, he would suspect her.

But fortune is prodigal in her favours. Having given Rosalind a two hundred thousand to one chance of seeing Aylmer's name the fickle goddess contrived that Mr. Tompkins's heel should turn on an uneven parquet floor. Even a floor-walker can resemble Achilles in some respects. He fell, and sustained a painful abrasion of an elbow. Far worse, he split the sleeve of his frock coat, and had to retire for repairs. The lift had hardly carried him off before "Society in Pictures" was propped open behind some bales of art muslin stacked on the counter, and Rosalind was devouring Aylmer's studies of "Lady Betty Luttrell" looking at herself as "Queen of the Tournay," Henry Jenkins on his hunting bullock, and the rest of the now famous black and white sketches.

For her there could be only one Richard Aylmer in all the world, but, to make assurance doubly sure, the sketches were signed, and Rosalind recognised the script. Did she not treasure as a pitiful souvenir of a bitter-sweet daydream the note which Aylmer had pushed under the door of her bedroom in the Wheathampsted inn?

She was so agitated at first that she could hardly sense the meaning of the admirable drawings. She remembered reading something about the historical pageant which was attracting so many fashionable idlers to Yorkshire, but a throbbing heart and a brain on fire were unequal to ordered thought just then. All she knew was that she had found him again, found the man whom she had lost so irretrievably, and a frantic impulse welled up in her to take the next train North, and make sure of meeting him, of hearing him even speak once more. It was a mad notion, of course. It would be difficult to obtain leave after having exhausted her annual holiday so recently. She could only afford the heavy expense of the journey by doing without a winter costume and a warm coat which she really needed. She had no valid excuse for such an escapade, and Aylmer might resent her presence if he suspected the cause of it. There were fifty good reasons why the crazy project should not be entertained, and only one in favour of it. Poor Rosalind! She thrilled again at the memory of that kiss, and her eyes grew dim with the pain of it.

Luckily, she was well liked by the other girls in the department. At least three customers were quietly appropriated by her friends because she "seemed to be worried about something."

But Rosalind had been reared in a hard school, so, if the throbbing pulse did not yield altogether to grim reality, it could not wholly ignore the promptings of sedate commonsense. It would be sheer folly to rush off to Yorkshire on a wild-goose chase of that sort. Artists often visited the shop to make sketches of Paris hats and gowns for the very newspaper which had brought about this heart-ache, and she knew that their drawings had to be sent in at least ten days before publication. Allowing

a much smaller margin for work of a news value, Aylmer had nevertheless completed his task at least a month ago, as the journal was already three weeks old.

Perhaps the editor would tell her something definite. Dare she go to the telephone booth on the ground floor and inquire? Of course, she dare. If necessary, to relieve her anxieties Rosalind would have dared worse things than an official reprimand plus a small fine for using the customers' telephone during working hours. Audacity is a vital ingredient of success in any doubtful undertaking. Within a minute the girl was talking to someone in the office of "Society in Pictures"—a marvellous someone who could tell her exactly what she wanted to know.

"To the best of my belief," said the voice, "Mr. Aylmer is now at Mountford. . . . No, we are not acquainted with him personally, but a paragraph in an evening newspaper last Thursday professed to give some details of his career. He was famous in the Air Force during the war, and crashed badly in France during 1918. He was known then as the 'Singing Poet,' or some similar nickname. He made such a slow recovery from injuries to his head that he was discharged from hospital only about a couple of months ago. . . . Of course, you understand that I am merely telling you what the writer of the paragraph in question said. . . . Yes. His work is exceedingly clever. Are you a friend of his? I hope you will persuade him to call here soon. We want to meet him."

Rosalind's heart leaped. Here was this most amiable "voice" giving her a plausible excuse for seeking Aylmer, and, perhaps, luring him to London!

Her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks flushed. Never did the physical appearance of an employé lend less credence to the plea of "illness" which she had resolved on already to account for her absence next day. Yet she was hardly

back at her counter before a messenger came from the manager's office demanding loudly the presence of "Miss Jones" in that august headquarters. The boy who summoned her could not solve her perplexities. It was almost unbelievable that Mr. Tompkins, bruised and coatless, should have reported her already for neglecting her work, while she was certain that no one had noticed the surreptitious visit to the telephone. What could it be? Well, it was silly to anticipate evil. She would know soon enough.

Rosalind found Miss Smithers, "buyer" of silks, ribbons, artificial flowers, and dress trimmings, seated with the general manager in his room. The two faced each other across a table littered with samples of real and make-believe silks—chiefly the products of Lyons looms, though a few British and American patterns figured in the heap.

Miss Smithers, a slight, faded woman of sixty, gave the girl a wintry smile of recognition, but Mr. Bompas was much more genial.

"So this is the young lady you have in mind?" he said, apparently addressing Miss Smithers but looking at Rosalind. "Pull that chair up, Miss Jones. I wish to ask you a few questions. Don't feel at all embarrassed. They deal mostly with professional matters. Now, here are two pieces of material," and he contrasted a length of an exquisitely toned French grey with another of good quality but somewhat lighter in shade. "Which would you say is the better?"

Rosalind, though vastly surprised, had regained self-control. In a few seconds she had made her choice.

"This one," she said, crumpling the more deeply tinted silk with skilled fingers.

"Why?" went on Mr. Bompas.

"Because it is altogether finer in texture and more carefully woven. The dye, too, is perfect."

"Which of the two will sell the best—the better?"

"I am afraid the majority of customers, sir, would take this other one. It appeals to the untrained eye, and should be at least four shillings a yard cheaper."

Mr. Bompas placed the tips of his thumbs and fingers together, leaned back in his chair, and gazed at Miss Smithers as though he had discovered some hitherto unseen beauty in her withered features. Miss Smithers, on her part, met his glance with unflinching gravity. It was not for her to speak—yet.

"I am told," went on the great man suavely, "that you are not only interested in your work but spend your spare time learning French. What progress have you made in your studies, Miss Jones?"

Rosalind now smiled with her wonted cheerfulness. It was evident, at any rate, that she had not been called to the abode of the inner gods to receive a wigging.

"I certainly am getting along well in conversation just now, sir," she said. "Luckily for me, a French girl lives in a neighbouring flat, and we exchange lessons. I had memorised a good deal of the grammar, and had a fair vocabulary already, but she has helped me greatly in the spoken language."

"I have—er—gathered as much from Miss Smithers. Now, Miss Jones, we have decided to give you a trial as assistant Continental buyer in your department. Miss Smithers leaves for Paris in a few days, and you will go with her. If, after close association with her during the next few months, you are deemed capable of doing the work unaided, Miss Smithers proposes to—er—gradually relinquish the foreign journeys to your hands."

For a few seconds Rosalind felt like slipping off the

chair to the floor, and yielding to a quite realistic fainting-fit. At a real crisis in her life, when an agreeable and lucrative career was opening up so unexpectedly, she was confronted with a dreadful alternative. If she sought permission to run off to the North forthwith, these two people, planning her great and lasting benefit, would deem their efforts flouted. Could she blame them if they dismissed her with coldness, almost with ignominy? A dozen other girls in the shop were fully qualified to deputise for Miss Smithers, and hoping for the reversion of such an important position with the firm. What was she to say? How should she act? It was manifestly unfair to accept advancement that afternoon and brazenly vanish next day, while to ask for even a brief holiday was unthinkable, since none knew better than she herself the bustle of preparation and stock-taking which heralded Miss Smithers's visits to Paris.

So the roses fled from her cheeks, her eyes grew moist, and her tongue could not master the forlorn irresolution of her brain.

"I—I—cannot tell you how grateful I am," she began brokenly.

Mr. Bompas was pleased by this show of emotion. Business was the obsession of his life, and he liked to see in others an equally overwhelming enthusiasm.

"Yes, yes," he nodded indulgently, since all women were temperamental, and found the same relief in tears that a man might obtain from a frenzied whoop, or a strong drink, or both. "That's all right, Miss Jones. I am sure you will do well, and be a credit to the house. Miss Smithers will see you later, and manage details. Meanwhile, she and I have to examine some accounts."

Rosalind gathered vaguely that the first part of her ordeal was ended, and she would have an hour or more

in which to collect her senses. She rose, but, most fortunately for her peace of mind subsequently, was moved to thank the woman who had so obviously befriended her.

"You have always been most kind, Miss Smithers," she said, still with that high-pressure catch in the throat. "I do hope I may be able to justify your good opinion of me."

The older woman gave her a shrewd look, being well aware that the girl's curious discomfiture arose from some more deep-seated cause than mere bewilderment because she had secured a provisional step in rank.

"That's all right," she said drily. "Come to my room at half-past four, and we'll have a chat."

The respite served only to heighten Rosalind's difficulties. Her father, salesman in a music-publishing firm, had long complained of lessened commission and ever-growing competition. She had realised during the past year that an increasing burthen of household cares would have to be borne by her young shoulders, and it was sheer madness to think now of doing anything which might cost her the great opportunity lying at her feet. But, happily for the world, a woman generally chooses the path of self-sacrifice when duty conflicts with desire. It was a somewhat sorrowful but wholly subdued Rosalind who tapped on the door of Miss Smithers's office at the appointed time.

Yet was she fated to receive shock after shock that day. Miss Smithers locked a folding desk as she entered, telephoned to the catering department for tea and bread and butter, pointed to a chair, and said briskly:—

"Now, Peggy, tell me all about it. What's troubling you? A man, of course. It's always a man, when it isn't two men. My dear, wait till you have had some of my experiences in Paris. Frenchmen are terrors. You'll have an awful time there because you're so pretty!"

Now, to pour one's trouble into a sympathetic ear is, or should be, the first principle of psychological treatment. It was well, too, that Rosalind had fought her fight already, and won a partial victory over her emotions. She told her story simply, and without tears. What did it all amount to when rehearsed in this friendly way? A few hours of joyous romance, a few days of hopeless yearning, a fading dream of that which would never come to pass—what was left save the taste of Dead Sea apples?

Miss Smithers, whose heart, perhaps, was not so atrophied as her crinkled face, listened in silence. When Rosalind was gulping down her tea with a brave smile the other woman put a few leading questions.

"This Richard Aylmer must be the new black and white artist people are talking about," she said. "Yet he never so much as spoke of that side of his work to you?"

"No. But isn't it true that one art is kin to the other? I sing, I can play, so I have an eye for colour."

"Still, his song-writing and singing were amateurish, whereas he seems to have a real gift for drawing. You see, I have watched him from the start. We advertise regularly in 'Society in Pictures.' There was an odd break in the series about a fortnight or three weeks ago."

"Maybe he was ill again!" and Rosalind bleached a little.

"Again?"

"Well, he is not long out of hospital."

"Has he never written?"

"He could not. He hasn't the least notion of my address."

"Why did he run off in that queer way?"

"I think he was afraid of Cellini and his music. There is good and bad in music, you know. I don't mean in its quality of execution, but in its effect on the hearer. One

cannot imagine evil in the same breath with Verdi or Sullivan, whereas the modern Italians and the Russian ballet are all sensual. Sometimes I find myself so absorbed and thrilled that when I become normal again I am a little shocked, so to speak. All at once, I hear a fiend chuckling amid a flood of exquisite harmony."

That remark seemed to give Miss Smithers cause to think. She sipped her tea in silence for a full minute.

"Will you be ready to cross with me next Sunday?" she said unexpectedly.

"Yes, quite ready."

"Of course, I pay all travelling and hotel expenses, and you will be allowed ten shillings a day extra while away from London. You will be absent about a fortnight this trip, as we must buy heavily for the autumn and winter."

"It will be most interesting," said Rosalind.

"I should think so, indeed. If I had been given such a chance when I was your age I wouldn't have bothered my brains about any young man, I can assure you."

Rosalind smiled. She was a clear-headed Londoner again. She felt that her companion had purposely shifted the conversation from dangerous ground.

"You don't deceive us girls by talking that way, Miss Smithers," she said. "We all know how sweet you really are, and we have often wondered why you never got married."

Miss Smithers poured out another cup of tea as though she were scalding the venturesome male who would dare make eyes at her.

"There is no other young man, is there?" she demanded tartly. "Why should I teach you the business, and have you gobbled up by a husband before the year is out?"

Then Rosalind laughed heartily.

"No, indeed," she vowed. "I don't worry at all about

young men. Most of them are none too admirable. I was swept off my feet once—*et voilà tout; c'est fini.*"

"I'm not so sure," and Miss Smithers bit a piece of bread aggressively. "We women did wonders in handling high explosives during the war, and I think it was because there's a lot of TNT in each one of us."

"Not much left in me now," said Rosalind calmly. "It is highly improbable that I shall ever again see Mr. Aylmer, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"I suppose 'Society in Pictures' would never send a man of his standing to make fashion drawings?"

Miss Smithers permitted herself to look slightly amused.

"What in the world put that notion into your head?" she cried. "Are you psychic?"

"I hardly know what being psychic means?"

"In this case it means gathering the unspoken thought."

"Now you puzzle me," cried Rosalind frankly.

"Well, I dislike hidden things in words. I—er—used to get plenty of the *double entente* in Paris show-rooms. Frenchmen simply cannot help talking slosh to a woman. This, then, is what I have in mind. Go to Yorkshire to-morrow. See your friend, and ask him to oblige you by sketching a group of ladies at the Pageant, with permission for us to use the drawing in our autumn catalogue. You have wit enough to make a few notes of the costumes mostly in vogue—of course, I mean only the modern clothes for the letter-press—and I'll give you a voucher for ten pounds expenses, which the cashier will hand you if you catch him before five-thirty. Your part of the bargain is to be back here on Saturday morning, when I'll tell you what to pack for Paris. . . . What do you think

of that for a plan? It will give us something new in the catalogue line, at any rate."

Miss Smithers unlocked her desk, and was reaching for a memorandum block when two soft young arms circled her neck, and a soft young cheek was pressed against her less pliant one.

"Oh, you *are* a darling!" whispered Rosalind.

Miss Smithers was highly indignant.

"What nonsense!" she protested. "Anyone would imagine I was assisting your silly schemes! You'll come back cured. But, bring that sketch, whatever happens! . . . Here's your voucher. I wish you wouldn't weep over my face. And—not a word to a soul about all this, though you can tell your people where you are going, and about the commission for the firm."

Rosalind's eyes were swimming, but she contrived to stammer:—

"Celia and I walk home together. If I give her no hint at all she will be hurt."

"Celia?"

"I mean Dollie Temple."

"So it's 'Rosalind' and 'Celia,' is it? You and your troubadours! Can you trust her?"

"Absolutely."

"Tell her as little as possible, then. I'm sixty, Peggy, and know the little weaknesses of my dear sisters."

Celia, who was in "hats," saw at once that her friend was strangely flurried when they met in the cloak-room.

"Hello! What's gone wrong?" she demanded.

"Is that how I look?" tittered Rosalind nervously. "Well, we can't talk here. Wait till we are by ourselves."

The two girls went out into a side street. It was their habit to turn northwards and stroll through the quiet squares, but Rosalind grabbed her friend's arm, swung

her into Oxford Street, hailed a taxi, pushed Celia inside, and told the driver to stop just beyond the Marble Arch.

Now, in the everyday existence of these two, a taxi was an unheard-of extravagance.

"Are you ill, or crazy?" cried Celia, with the rounded eyes of genuine concern.

"Neither, dear. Just a trifle mad, and *so* happy. At least, I think I'm happy. But be a good, kind Celia, and don't speak again till we're in the Park, and seated under a big tree, a long way from everybody, because I may cry, or laugh hysterically, but perhaps I won't do either if I can drop my eyelids for a few minutes, and fancy I've been dreaming, and that I shall wake up once more in the same old London."

"All right, old thing! Sleep away!"

And Celia hummed an improvised lullaby:—

> Hush-a-bye, baby, this is tip-top.
> Nothing can harm you, I'll watch the cop;
> But if a tire bursts the taxi will fall,
> And down will come baby, taxi, and all.

Meanwhile she studied Rosalind's face with growing bewilderment, and wondered why a folded illustrated paper was clutched so tightly in one gloved hand.

"She's heard something!" mused sharp-witted young London. "It's in that paper. It's about that song"—for the girls had long since bought a certain never-to-be-forgotten lyric—"and someone has discovered who Cellini and Aylmer really are!"

Not so wide of the mark for a sheer guess, but far short of reality as unfolded by Rosalind in the comparative privacy of the Park. Half a story was impossible. Rosalind's mind was incapable in that hour of any shred of concealment. She had to tell everything or nothing, but

she knew well that her secrets were safe with one so faithful as Celia.

The latter listened in silence. Her loyal soul was incapable of envy. Her friend's feet were set on the highway to fortune. So much the better to be her friend. She was a trifle disappointed, perhaps, that Cellini did not figure in the marvellous tale, but that phase of the situation was brushed aside firmly.

"Well, you *have* had an afternoon!" she cried, when Rosalind, as though calling the heavens to witness, showed a roll of notes in her purse. "I'm not surprised you wanted a taxi. I should have yelled for an aeroplane. And I thought I was taking the star turn to-day in selling thirty hats and earning fifteen bob in com. Now I fling away ambition. . . . Show me those pictures!"

Soon the two heads were close together over the double page. Rosalind was calmer now, and could take in details.

"It is really very fine work," she said, trying to convey artistic appreciation, and no more.

"A lot better than photographs," agreed Celia. "That old Castle has an air of romance. Every stone seems to speak."

Yet, neither pair of eyes was fixed long on the vignettes of Montfort. Ever did a closer scrutiny travel back to the spirited drawing of Lady Betty Luttrell gazing at her own charming presentment. Infinitely graceful, the pose of the slender figure suggested aristocratic aloofness, pride of birth, consciousness of unbroken descent from the Norman lady whom she was to make live again. Of course, Betty Luttrell laid claim to no such blue-blooded lineage, but the keen critics in the Park took the text literally for what it represented, and there can be no doubt they interpreted Aylmer's true intent.

Rosalind was quick to note how the artist had idealised

his subject. She knew no Latin, yet she felt with Lucretius in his verse of two thousand years ago:—

> Quoniam medio de fonte leporum
> Surgit amari aliquid, quod in ipsis floribus angat.

Most assuredly would she have understood Byron's rendering of the lines:—

> Full from the fount of joy's delicious springs
> Some bitter o'er the flowers its bubbling venom flings.

But she was woman enough to forestall any comment by Celia.

"She looks nice—this Lady Betty," she said placidly, though aware that the summer sky had suddenly lost some of its blueness, and the tints of a clump of evergreens near at hand were not quite so vivid.

"Y—yes," agreed wise Celia.

Rosalind laughed somewhat shrilly.

"There's no use in saying 'Y—yes,'" she protested, "Anyone can see she is well bred and beautiful. Mr. Aylmer would not flatter her, you may be sure."

"Yet he said we had all the hallmarks of duchesses, or something of the sort."

A pause. Then Rosalind again:—

"Do you think she knew she was being sketched?"

"Of course she did. Trust her for that."

"Probably, by this time, they are quite good friends."

Celia was vouchsafed a veritable inspiration.

"Why, I remember now!" she cried. "One of the papers said the other day that the engagement of Lady Betty Luttrell and Lord Somebody Something would be announced during the Mountford Pageant."

Rosalind's heart missed a beat or two.

"Are you sure of the names?" she enquired.

"Yes, of the girl's, at any rate. And you needn't be so casual about it. You know you'd like to stick a pin in her."

"Celia, darling, don't chaff me! I've had a perfectly awful and deliriously happy day. Probably it's all a delusion—not my new job, I mean, as I'll try hard to make good in that—but this other mad happening—my finding his whereabouts at the very instant which enabled Miss Smithers to send me to Yorkshire. I want to stick a pin into myself rather than into Lady Betty. Shall I get up at seven-thirty in the morning, and realise that instead of catching the Scotch express from King's Cross I really have to take the bus to the Circus as usual? Oh, dear! Do you think people will stare if I dab my eyes with a hanky?"

CHAPTER XI

SHOWING HOW ROSALIND CAME TO MOUNTFORD

Director Calvert gulped down what he described as "a hot whisky and soda." The first day of the Pageant was ended. In three and a quarter strenuous hours his cohort of players had completed a programme from which each successive performance would lop ten minutes, so that Thursday would bring the snap and vitality which everyone desired but confidence alone could achieve. For the first time during the afternoon his Napoleonic manner relaxed. He even smiled genially when Tommy Trenholme, resplendent as Sir John Froissart, asked him what he "thowt on it all."

"I am satisfied—quite satisfied," he said. "You have left undone those things you ought to have done, and done the things you ought not to have done, but, on the whole, the show has gone with a bang. At least a dozen newspaper men have congratulated me, and those birds don't sing if they're not pleased. . . . Yes, another of the same. My throat is parched."

"By gum; and so it owt to be," grinned Sir John. "It was a fair treat te hear ye bouncin' all the nobs i't' county. They don't get talked tiv like that yance (once) iv a blue moon."

"And what about the thick-headed farmers?" demanded Major Randolph, who had clanked into the tent unheard among the hubbub of voices and rattle of armour without.

"Why, major, we're used tiv it. Ah can't sell a coo athoot tellin' t'other chap he's a common robber, but Ah

was tickled te dëath when Mr. Calvert here asked Lord Francis Grosmont te thry an' not look sike a silly ass."

Calvert, quite human now, glanced around hurriedly, but the bluff Yorkshireman laughed again.

"We're none sëa daft as all that, sir," he chuckled. "Lord Francis hez gëan off on t' back seat o' Lady Betty's dog-cart. My! If that cob of hers had twigged him there would ha bin a rare fuss. . . . Hello! Here's Mr. Aylmer! . . . Coom an' join us. Ye mak' a bonny archer. Ye do, an' all."

Aylmer certainly carried himself jauntily in an attractive suit of Lincoln green. The erect, lithe soldier is the same in all periods and all uniforms—he looks the part. Randolph was equally at home as a major in the Lancers or a Norman knight. Aylmer filled the rôle either in the airman's blue or the feathered hat, loose-fitting jerkin, tight hose and capacious boots of a fourteenth-century forester.

"Lacking a cup of sack or malmsey I'll show my mettle in downing a pint of beer at a draught," said Aylmer. "Mr. Calvert, men have been decorated for less than you have accomplished to-day. . . . Major, I'll ask your county member to rush a brief bill through Parliament permitting you to retain your Norman rank and coat of mail, the latter to be worn on all public occasions."

"It's rather odd how soon one gets used to this boiler-plating," said Randolph. "Of course, the horse carries the weight, but the armour brings an absurd sense of superiority, not to one's fellow men but to the ordinary affairs of life. I'm perfectly certain the johnny who first said *'Noblesse oblige'* used to swank around in hauberk and cuirass."

The thought was clear enough, yet the famous phrase was coined by the Duc de Lévis during the life-time of

plenty of men who dream even yet of reducing their golf handicap.

"By the way, if you fellows have nothing better to do, come and dine with me to-night," went on Randolph. "A fore-quarter of lamb and some pre-war whisky ought to go down well after the afternoon's excitements. No evening dress, you know."

The last was a graceful concession to Trenholme, who was well aware of it.

"Don't let me tak' you frae yer friends, major," he said instantly.

"You mean Sir Claude Berkeley and the others? They're dining at the Lodge to-night. I was invited, but ducked, as I preferred a quiet evening."

"Oh, is *that* the festivity?" broke in Aylmer. "A man named Cellini, a musical friend whom I picked up in a curious way near St. Albans, is taking his concert party there at nine o'clock. He is really a great artist. Have you heard him play the violin?"

"Yes."

Randolph had lighted a cigarette, and his face was hidden in a cloud of smoke.

"Well, if he is free to-morrow evening——"

"Don't plan any musical performance for me," said the other. "I detest the violin. It gives me a species of neuralgia of the nervous system. No, Aylmer, Trenholme and I will dine with you next week, when Calvert will be in London, and we can express our free and unbiassed opinions about him."

"Right-o. That's only fair. Calvert is having his turn now with us. I'll come to-night with pleasure. As a matter of fact, I, too, was asked to go to the Lodge, but explained to Lord Mountford that as Cellini, who is unquestionably a gentleman by birth, is staying with me,

I didn't care to make one of the *élite* while he was mumming. It felt like playing Dives to his Lazarus."

"Ye needn't ha' let that worry you," said Trenholme. "Yon lad rakes in a heap o' money. I give him a bob meself every evenin'. I do, an' all."

For once, this canny Tyke spoke seriously, though he joined in the laugh evoked by his unconscious agreement with the advice of a Yorkshire farmer to a son starting in life:

"Hear all, an' say nowt; sup all, an' pay for nowt; and, if ye dëa owt for nowt, dëa 't for yersen."

Calvert had accounts to check, so the others strolled toward the town. There were no dressing-rooms, as such, on the Pageant ground. The performers came and went in their costumes, though, where make-up was necessary, the director's skilled assistants saw to it. The streets of Mountford, therefore, presented a wonderful spectacle, what between the Pageanteers and the dense crowd which had gathered to see them. In an hour, or less, the medley of colour and raiment would have vanished. At that time, six o'clock, Mountford was gay as Nice during the Carnival, and far more picturesque.

The Earl, Professor Hartley-Browne, and the colonel of dragoons who figured as Agricola, had escorted the Lord Lieutenant to the station. The train which took away the great man had brought in, among its few passengers, a girl who masked a good deal of nervousness by the self-possession of a Londoner. She was surprised at the extent and semblance of the out-going throng—since many a mediæval lord and lady and stout man-at-arms lived in the neighbouring villages—but managed to secure a porter, who carried her portmanteau to the exit.

"Where can I find a room?" she enquired. "I would prefer quiet lodgings to a hotel."

The man laughed, good-naturedly if crudely.

"By jing, miss," he wheezed, "haven't you heard what's going on here? Two thousand people were turned away last week-end. That's one reason why the train is so full. You couldn't get cage-room for a canary in Mountford to-night."

Quick distress, almost fright, stared from Rosalind's blue eyes. This phase of Pageantry in small towns had never occurred to her. Newspaper warnings on the point were several days old. What she had read during the long journey North dealt only with the Pageant and the actors therein. She knew more names already than Aylmer himself, but had given no thought to possible lack of accommodation.

"Oh," she countered bravely, "I shall discover a nook somewhere. For instance, if you are married, you must have a cottage and a spare sofa?"

"I've t' cottage all right, miss, but the wife an' I are sleepin' on t' kitchen floor, an' twëa (two) bairns i' t' scullery. We've let both our bedrooms for ten pun' apiece till Satherday."

Rosalind knew then that her plight was really serious, and she had little more than two hours of daylight left for her quest if she were not to be stranded for the night.

"At what hour does the station close?" she asked.

"Seven o'clock."

"Well, take care of my bag till then. Will you be here?"

"Yes, miss. An' I'll tell you what. You needn't hurry. I live in that house over there, the second in the row facin' you across the meadow. My name's Thompson, an' I'll come and get your bag at any time afore eleven."

The man meant to be kind, but his friendly offer struck

a further chill in the girl's heart, since it was obvious that he expected her to be turned away from scores of houses at which she might apply.

She thanked him, however, and headed for the town at the moment Lord Mountford, Hartley-Browne, and the gilded Agricola emerged from the station. The Earl put the resplendent warrior in his car, telling the chauffeur that he and the Professor would walk home, as they were stiff with sitting in an uncomfortable chair all the afternoon. As a consequence the two elderly men and the London shop-girl walked into Mountford almost side by side.

Rosalind, of course, had seen the car and its glittering occupant, and heard enough of the Earl's instructions to gather that he was the chauffeur's employer. She decided that he and his companions were persons from whom a young woman might safely seek information in a town where all were strangers.

"Forgive me for bothering you," she said, stepping out to overtake them, "but I have just arrived here from London and don't know a soul. Is there the least chance, do you think, of my being able to secure a bed anywhere?"

The two halted.

"Hum! Ha!" said the Professor.

"From London?" exclaimed the Earl severely, as though he disapproved of London as a place of residence.

"Yes."

Notwithstanding her queer predicament, Rosalind could not help smiling.

"There's nothing to giggle at," snapped his lordship. "You wouldn't expect to find a bed and breakfast at Buckingham Palace at a moment's notice, would you?"

"No, indeed." Yet Rosalind smiled again.

"Well, there are fourteen kings and queens sleeping in

Mountford to-night, to say nothing of their courts and a whole army of sightseers. I don't believe the police could provide a cell in which to lock you up if you committed a crime. What in the world brings you here at such a time?"

"A man at King's Cross sold me a ticket quite cheerfully," she retorted, "and nearly a score of railway officials took care I was in the right train all day."

But the Earl was not to be placated by a quip, even from a pretty girl. He was, as the excellent American phrase has it, distinctly "peeved." Hartley-Browne uttered never a word.

"Dash it all!" he cried, surveying her perplexedly. "I don't know what to do with you. My own guests are camping out with lodge-keepers and gardeners, and a round dozen of youngsters have tents in a padlock. You have no friends, you say, and refuse to tell me why you are here at all——"

Rosalind was wise beyond her years. She remembered now having seen a coronet on the car, though its significance had escaped her hitherto.

"Please forgive me," she said. "I didn't quite mean that. I was sent here by my firm to make notes of the fashions, and I have two commissions for Mr. Richard Aylmer, the artist, whom you may have heard of."

"Do you know *him?*"

"Yes, a little. That is—we have met once—for a few hours."

For the life of her she couldn't avoid blushing, but the tide of colour fled as rapidly as it rose, and left her rather pale, even under the tan of a long journey on a hot day.

"Hum! Ha!" purred the Professor.

Then the Earl turned and rended his friend.

"If you would pass some sensible remark instead of

giving us a bad imitation of a man playing a tooth-comb it would be more to the point," he said indignantly.

"Ha! Hum! Let us find Aylmer!"

"Oh, no! Anything but that, please," protested Rosalind, thoroughly flustered now.

"Quite right! Fiddlesticks!" said Lord Mountford, answering both at once. "Aylmer is putting up those singers, and Jackson tells me he has given his bedroom to the two girls. . . . Well, well! Something must be done. A nice-looking young woman like you can't be left to sleep on the moor, though many of your forbears found the sweet heather comfortable enough. Come along! Sharp's the word, or the Professor and I will be late for dinner. Perhaps we'll meet the car coming back from the Colonel's place. Stir your archæological stumps, Browne! I'm going to show you a miracle. . . . Got any luggage?" This to Rosalind.

She explained about porter Thompson.

"Ah, yes. A good fellow. Give him a bob, and he'll bring your bag safely."

They reached the High-street, and, if Rosalind had not guessed already that she was in good company, saluting policemen and the lifted hats of local tradespeople would have reassured her on the point.

The Earl led her straight to the Barkers' house, which, it will be remembered, was only a little way removed from the main thoroughfare. He knocked, and the door was opened by the nonogenarian's plump and matronly granddaughter, whose ordinarily good-tempered face was set in a stony expression until she recognised one, at least, of the callers.

"Come in, my lord," she said. "Gran'feyther is oot, an' I thowt some o' them plaguey thrippers were worritin' us."

"So they are!" cackled his lordship. "You've hit the nail on the head. You Barkers always do. That's what one of us is—a tripper, but a dashed pretty one, don't you think?"

"Ay! There's nowt wrang wi' her looks."

Rosalind, though exceedingly nervous, smiled most pleasantly at such outspoken appraisement. It was certainly a novel experience for a London girl who, let it be admitted at once, thought herself somewhat above the average in appearance and general "smartness," to be treated by these Northerners, whether peer or peasant, as though she were a specimen of some unknown and distinctly inferior race. She little imagined how far that agreeable smile went to stifle an imminent revolt, for the Barkers were stubbornly resolved not to take in "lodgers", Pageant or no Pageant.

"Well, this is the position," went on the Earl. "Some fools in London, where fools abound, have sent this poor girl here to write about frocks and get Mr. Aylmer to make some drawings. They just packed her off by train, taking it for granted that every door in Mountford would open wide at the mere name of Regent-street. For a conceited ass give me the born Cockney, all the time! Now, most fortunately, your grandfather told me yesterday that you had kept the invading army at bay, so I am hoping, as a personal obligation, that you will give this young lady a room and something to eat."

"Hum! Ha!" broke in the Professor suddenly. "There will—er—be no question about the—er—expense."

Rosalind's eyes filled with tears. She would scorn the notion of yielding to hysteria, but her cup of life had been filled to overflowing during the past twenty-four hours.

"You are all very, very kind," she said, trying vainly

to repress a break in her voice. "I have plenty of money —I have really."

"Browne," grunted the Earl, "your remark was well meant, but untimely."

"We shan't quarrel about the cost, my dear," said the other woman, melting forthwith. "It's not likely we'd refuse owt in reason asked by Lord Mountford. What's your nëame?"

Luckily, Rosalind understood.

"Peggy Jones," she said.

"Well, Miss Jones, we'll mak' you comfortable here. Gran'feyther may raise a fuss, but dëan't mind him. His bark is wuss ner his bite."

Rosalind was murmuring her thanks when the Earl dragged the Professor away. It was half-past six, and they might have to walk the two miles to the Lodge. While she was explaining to Mrs. Barker—whose husband, the old man's grandson, had fallen at Ypres—the arrangement about her luggage, the male dragon of the house appeared. He eyed the stranger suspiciously.

"Whëa is 't?" he demanded, ignoring her completely after the first glance. Mrs. Barker told him, in the vernacular, which Rosalind could hardly follow. Then the girl had an inspiration. Had she not studied every line of Aylmer's work in the various numbers of "Society in Pictures" bought when Celia and she quitted the Park the previous day?

"Why," she cried, "you are the Mr. Barker whom Mr. Aylmer sketched last week! I would know you anywhere."

"Ay, mebbe," muttered the old man, though his frosty manner softened perceptibly. "But hoo did *you* coom te see 't?"

"It was published this morning. I have the paper in my bag."

"And what d'ye say they call ye?"

She told him. Mr. Barker shook his head.

"Mr. Aylmer said nowt aboot a Peggy," he informed her, his tone stiffening again. "He rambled on aboot a Rosalind, but I'd nivver heerd tell on her."

"A Rosalind!"

"Ay. We had a bit of a crack aboot t'owd Castle. He's a smart lad, yon. He is, an' all."

Mrs. Barker attributed the look of blank amazement on their guest's face to inability to grasp her grandfather's meaning.

"You'll not have come all that way without a bag?" she said, in quite good English.

Rosalind produced the railway company's voucher, and told once more of Thompson.

"If ye're not over tired, gran'feyther," said his relative, "gan te t' station an' tell Thompson te bring t' young leddy's bag here. Tea'll be ready by t' time you're back. . . . Now, Miss, come with me, an' I'll show you your room. It's the only empty one in Mountford to-day. You were lucky to fall in with his lordship. Did you know him before?"

"No. I just appealed to him because he looked such a nice fatherly old gentleman."

"Ay. He's all that. I wish there were more like him. Well—here you are. I'll bring you a jug of hot water. Come straight to the kitchen when you're ready."

Thus was Rosalind made free of the Barker household, for a Yorkshire high tea was spread on a spotless kitchen table, and she placated the crusty old man not only by showing him Aylmer's sketch but reading the small-type comments thereon, as she knew already they were flatter-

ing. Fortunately, too, she was hungry, and both praised and ate Mrs. Barker's cheesecakes, "fat rascals," jam turn-overs, and the rest of the good things provided.

It was easy, of course, to keep the talk to Aylmer and the Pageant. The very first question she asked had reference to Lady Betty Luttrell's engagement. Was it formally announced yet? No, but local gossip had it that the news would be given out at a dinner and dance arranged for the Friday evening, after Lord Francis Grosmont had crowned her ladyship Queen of the Tournay.

And how long had Mr. Aylmer been in Mountford?

"Over a month," said Mrs. Barker. "Just like you, he made friends with the Earl, and was allowed to rent rooms with Sergeant Jackson and his wife, the Castle caretakers."

"Nay, that's not t' right end o' t' stick," put in Mr. Barker. "He was sent there by that gad-about, Tommy Trenholme. But he seeän (soon) med' up tiv t' Lodge foälk, what wiv' his dhrawin', an' singin', and soom daft story of his about owd times i' t' Castle. Not but what he's a knowledgeable lad, wi' a fine gift o' t' gab, an' cheery ways. He is, an' all."

"Singing?" Rosalind caught that, and was surprised, though she hardly knew why.

"Ah! They tell me he can warble like a thrush. P'raps that's the reason he took up wi' yon Christy Minsthrels."

"Oh, they will be the party of musicians Lord Mountford spoke of. Who are they?"

"Twëa (two) men, an' twëa gals. Yan on 'em is a fair knock-out—a chap wiv' a iron hand an' a I-talian nëame."

"Not Signor Cellini!" Rosalind nearly choked with a crumb.

"Ay. That's him. My, but you've heerd a lot already."

The girl drank some tea, and recovered her breath.

"That is the extent of my knowledge, Mr. Barker," she said tactfully, sensing some unknown quicksand in being so outspoken. "Mr. Cellini is a really marvellous player, and it is quite natural he should attend an important affair like the Pageant. I was surprised at the moment by discovering that I was actually acquainted with two people in a town where I am a complete stranger."

Forewarned now, she put no more leading questions, feeling sure she would learn a good deal by simply listening to the old man and his grand-daughter, and merely seeking a general explanation of aught she did not understand. Nor was she mistaken. Before the meal was finished she had fitted many new and surprising facts into their places.

Oddly enough, her own emotions were stilled. Aylmer was mixing with the great ones of the earth, and it was evident that his antipathy to Cellini's compelling music had vanished. He was remote from her as a planet, and the sweet madness of one Midsummer's Eve must be forgotten altogether, or, if that were impossible, buried beneath an ever-increasing avalanche of new duties and strictly professional experiences. She resolved to call at the Castle before it was quite dark, as the artist might be busy next day, and there was little time to spare if she would succeed in the most important part of Miss Smithers's commission.

She had risen from the table, intent on a hat and jacket, when the street-door, which led straight into the combined kitchen and living-room, was partly opened by the lifting of a latch, and a pleasant-sounding voice cried:

"Anyone at home? May I come in for a minute?"

"Ay," said Barker instantly, adding, under his breath: "Dang me if it isn't as good as a play!"

The old man might be ninety-four, but his eyes were keen and his heart young, so Rosalind had erred greatly in imagining that her flutterings and alternations of colour and carefully-guarded questions were escaping the notice of the Barker family.

Her host's comment did not reach her ears, however. Here were she and Richard Aylmer gazing at one another as though each deemed the other a materialised spirit.

"Rosalind!" he gasped, advancing a step, with outstretched hands and eager, devouring eyes.

By virtue of that subtle transfer of the unspoken thought which science has labelled telepathy she knew that in a fraction of a second she would be clasped in his arms. She drew back, timorous, startled, dreading the very moment of ecstasy she had longed for during many a sleepless night.

"Mr. Aylmer!" she cried, almost shrilly, fearful lest a quavering voice might betray her. "Can it really be you? How absurd! We were just talking about you."

She could find no better words. They sounded hollow and banal in her ears.

So, thus passed a great moment, else the history of the Mountford Pageant and of many leading actors therein would have to be re-written.

Aylmer recovered his wits. If ever a man might justly be described as a creature of impulse he was that man. Had Rosalind not flinched, even if the Barkers had not been present, he would undoubtedly have drawn the girl to his breast and kissed her. He had thought of her a good deal of late. In his sane hours she usurped the place filled in his dream-bemused mind by Lady Betty. So he literally could not have withstood the shock of meeting her so unexpectedly.

But now, just as quickly, he felt the fetters of conven-

tion. He smiled, joyously enough, to be sure, but the new light in his eyes was not that soul-piercing gleam under which the girl had wilted.

"Well, who says the age of miracles has passed?" he said. "First Cellini, now you! Where, then, is Celia? But if you are as glad to see me as I am at seeing you, you will certainly shake hands."

"By gum! If Ah were a yoong man—" began old Barker, with a cackling laugh.

"Gran'feyther!" broke in Mrs. Barker, and another crisis passed.

Then Rosalind's tongue loosened, and a flood of words poured forth. She gave an almost thrilling story of her adventures of the previous day, and was, if anything, somewhat ingenuous in linking the discovery of Aylmer's whereabouts with Miss Smithers's unaccountable craze for an autumn catalogue which should strike a new note of artistry. Her meeting with Lord Mountford was natural enough.

At this stage Barker was not to be repressed.

"Ay!" he chuckled, "t'owd Earl is nëa fool. He twigged hoo t'land lay when you dropped Mr. Aylmer's neäme. It's high time you turned up i' Mountford, young woman."

"Gran'feyther," said Mrs. Barker, even more sternly than before. "You rattle on like a basket o' broken crocks. . . . Happen you heard Miss Jones was here, Mr. Aylmer?"

"Miss Jones? Ah, yes. I had forgotten she was christened. . . . No. I came to show Mr. Barker the sketch I made of him. But, there it is, I see. Did you bring it, Rosalind?"

"Yes. I used it as a—as a passport."

"What vile luck that I should be late even now for a

dinner engagement! Come with me. I am sure Major Randolph will find room for such a guest."

"Oh, I can't," protested the girl, wishing with all her heart that she could. "I—have just had a wonderful meal, and—and—I am tired. It is a long way from London to Mountford."

"Sorry. I did not think of that. But, we must meet again soon. There are those sketches to be made, for one thing. And I have heaps to tell you. Come to the Castle to-morrow morning, and breakfast with us. No doubt you'll be glad to hear old Cellini's voice again. And he's in capital form these days. The air of Mountford seems to have rejuvenated him. It's the home of magic, anyhow. Look at Mr. Barker here—ninety-four, not out, and as keen as mustard in everything that makes life worth living. . . . You'll be with us at nine? Good. By Jove, I'll come and fetch you. Then you can tell me lucidly what wind of Heaven blew you here. . . . Goodbye, everybody. I have to run a mile, or Major Randolph's cook will await me with a basting-ladle full of scalding fat."

And he was gone, leaving behind him at least one person with a heart on fire. How well he looked. How brown, and wholesome—and happy. With the destructive self-analysis of women she knew she was not wholly pleased by that last self-evident fact. He had not forgotten her, but was nevertheless more contented, more settled in purpose, than when they parted so sadly in the garden of the Wheathampstead inn. Of course, there had been that one delirious moment of surprise. But it might have meant nothing—a mere ebullition of the artistic temperament. And what did this queer old Mr. Barker mean by the innuendoes which his grand-daughter was so anxious to suppress?

"I think I will go out into the main street before the light fails," she announced. "Are you remaining at home, Mrs. Barker, or will you come?"

"I've got to wash up, and there's bread to be laid, but you can't miss your way in Mountford," said the other woman.

"Ah'll gan wi' ye," volunteered Mr. Barker instantly.

"You'll dëa nowt o' t' söart," announced Mrs. Barker determinedly. "You'll just sit yersen doon an' light yer pipe. You've bin gallivantin' around t' town all day. Next thing you know you'll be doubled up wi' t' rheumatics."

The old man gave his relative a sheepish look, and subsided into an arm-chair. Rosalind understood then. Barker was ready to gossip, and Mrs. Barker meant stopping him. What had he to tell? Somehow, the girl evolved the fascinating figure of Lady Betty Luttrell out of the maelstrom of her thoughts She had only to utter some laughing comment on Aylmer's obvious predilection for her youthful ladyship as a model, and the members of the Barker *ménage* would solve all doubts by their replies, even if they tried to be non-committal.

But that would savour of meanness, almost of treachery, and Rosalind was neither mean nor a traitor. She hurried through a toilette, with only one glance at a mirror to make sure her hat was on straight, and strolled into the High-street. She turned to the right, toward the Castle, despite her expressed wish to look at the town, and had nearly reached the bridge over the Slee when she came face to face with Signor Benvenuto Cellini.

CHAPTER XII

WHEREIN CELLENI TAKES A HAND IN THE GAME

He was discussing some matter with Mannering, and would have passed Rosalind without seeing her had she not given him a smile of frank recognition. So overwhelming was his surprise that he stood stock still in the roadway, nearly dropping his beloved fiddle in the effort to raise his straw hat with the arm under which the instrument was tucked.

"Rosalind!' he gasped.

"Yes, maestro," she cried.

"Yet I was ready to believe that romance fled from this grey old world when we parted at Wheathampstead! But —where is Celia?"

"In London, I am sorry to say . . . I simply cannot explain things here, even if I might detain you. I hope to see you to-morrow at breakfast. Mr. Aylmer promised to come and escort me to your castle."

"Aylmer! The dog! He told me he was going to dine with some friends."

"That is quite true, I am sure. He was as astonished as you when he found me in Mr. Barker's house a few minutes ago."

"Whither away now, fair maid?"

"I meant having a good look at Montfort."

"There is no better point of view than this very spot. Gaze your fill, then, and stroll back with me into the town. I am consumed with curiosity. If you don't sate it at once I shall bungle that exquisite E in alt in the Intermezzo."

Rosalind was as ready to talk as Cellini to listen. She thought she could bide her time before reversing the rôles.

Meanwhile, Aylmer had hurried to Major Randolph's house, overtaking Calvert at the gate. Trenholme had arrived already, and the host was soon busily occupied in "shaking" a cocktail—a handicraft brought and bequeathed to Britain by the American army—in fact, left there for lack of the necessary raw materials at home.

Aylmer, of course, was bubbling over with the excitement of his wholly unexpected meeting with Rosalind. He was in a curiously exalted mood these days, though he would have laughed with the rest of scientifically-minded mankind if his state were attributed to the growing influence of the moon, which would be at the full on the following Friday night. He told his friends of his adventures on the Edgware-St. Albans-Hitchin Road, and they were duly interested in the somewhat remarkable re-appearance of "Rosalind" at Mountford. They did not discuss it, however, but remained unusually silent.

Aylmer certainly looked for a little more enthusiasm than they displayed. He put down Calvert's non-committal air and Trenholme's sheepish grin to their complete failure to appreciate Rosalind's many good qualities. As for Randolph, he, being a good soldier, naturally thought the mixing of a cocktail far more important than the arrival in the town of any girl.

"Won't old Cellini be surprised when I bring Rosalind to breakfast to-morrow morning?" he ran on. "Of course, I can't make you fellows understand how thoroughly Bohemian the whole affair was. Yet you must have heard the rascal playing his violin, and, if so, could not help yielding to his wizardry. Dash it all! I'm no judge, because I get keyed up so quickly, but he never fails to

draw the crowd. . . . Surely *you* have been told of his nightly concerts, Randolph?"

"Oh, yes. I listened to him one evening. Didn't I, Trenholme?"

"Ay, major. Ye did, an' all."

Randolph here broke the thread of Aylmer's confidences by pouring out a cool appetiser into four wine-glasses. But it is hard to repress an enthusiast. If these worldlings would not listen to a rhapsody on the graces of Rosalind, they must, at least, be made to bow before the eccentricities of genius.

"Cellini is really a most remarkable fellow," Aylmer persisted. "He is generous to a fault. He hypnotised me into writing some doggerel on a subject which he himself suggested, yet insists now that I shall share equally in a royalty on the resultant song, though he is wholly responsible for its success. He has an impish humour, too. It seems that in Leeds he picked up a penny with two 'Tails' I mean a coin which has been doctored for tossing —and then got Mannering, the other man who sings in the quartette, to toss for drinks or smokes with it. Mannering could not understand why he lost twelve times in succession, and thought his luck was phenomenally 'out.' At last Cellini explained. He had kept count, of course, so at present Mannering is on the free list for all such luxuries."

"What's that?" enquired Randolph, curiously alert now. "A penny with two 'Tails,' you say?"

"Yes. It is really made of two pennies, you know—coins which have been ground and then soldered together. Mannering always tossed with Cellini's money, so the latter 'called,' and won invariably."

"In fact, he could win or lose, just as he chose?"

"Obviously. But, look here, Randolph, don't run away

with the notion that my friend is a race-course sharper, or something of the sort. He's as straight a man as ever lived. I believe he met with some rotten mischance in earlier days, and has sunk his identity deliberately. That is no business of mine, nor of anyone's. I speak of Cellini as I find him, and he has proved himself a jolly good fellow."

"I'm sure he is. Don't tell these other blighters any more interesting yarns till I've compounded the intermediate cocktail. You know what they say in America—one is enough, two are too many, and three are not half enough."

Thus did Randolph secure the opportunity which even he needed to turn aside and master his agitation.

"By gum!" cried Trenholme, "I wish I had a penny like yon. It'd be w'uth a pig or two ivvery week at Malton market."

"Horace held that art consists in concealing art," said Calvert. "I think he would have liked that notion of making the other fellow toss."

"Ay," agreed Trenholme instantly. "He knew a bit, too, did that owd Roman. Ah was readin' his 'Ode te t' Spring' t'other day, an' dash me if he hadn't everything pat aboot t' buds swellin' i' t' trees an' t' new life burstin' frae t' grund. He mun ha' bin a farmer as weel as a poet."

"Hello!" cried Randolph, startled out of his own troubled mood. "Do you read Horace, Trenholme?"

"Ah can mak' a fick (make an effort) wiv' a dictionary," came the modest admission.

"Hurry up with that Manhattan, major," urged Calvert. "Between them, these two will make me as mad as a hatter."

"What have *I* done to-night, Napoleon?" laughed Aylmer.

"Nothing. But a month ago you blew in here from some place beyond the horizon, and electrified even a Professor of Archæology by your knowledge of fourteenth-century Norman castles, and now we have a moor-edge stock-breeder boasting an acquaintance with the classics. I believe this brilliant moon is affecting my poor brains. She woke me last night by peering in at my bedroom window."

"There's summat i' that moon theory," said Trenholme seriously. "Take twëa lambs—kill yan on t' risin' moon an' t' other on t' fall—t' mëat when cooked will cling te t' bone o' t' fust, an' shrink away frae t' second. Cut barley or whëat a couple of days afore it's ready, an' it'll ripen in' t' stook wi' t' New Moon an' Fust Quarther, but efter t' Moon's at full it'll stop green. An' when brewers med beer outen malt an' hops instëad o' glucose an' chemicals you couldn't get ony man iv these parts te start fermentation on a wanin' Moon."

"Now you know why your Pageant is such a howling success, Calvert," commented Aylmer.

By this time Randolph had recovered his self-possession.

"I agree with Trenholme," he said, coming forward with a laden tray. "If the moon can cause a tide in the apparently solid earth, why shouldn't she take a pull at us poor humans? By the way, all this erudition arose out of your reference to Cellini. Has he ever told you how he lost his left hand?"

"Yes, and no. His earliest explanation, given that day on the Hitchin road, was of some strenuous adventure in a Turkish *harim,* but a few minutes later he played on the generous impulses of a rich American by a delicate

allusion to the Western Front. My own opinion is that the Golden Horn version is nearer the truth."

"Of course, Cellini is not his name?"

"That's for him to say," was the careless answer. "I, for one, will always think of him as a re-incarnation of the Great Florentine."

"I am convinced the man is a gentleman," agreed Randolph, with such an air of solemn deliberation that Calvert lifted his glass and announced, with equal gravity:—

"The verdict of the Court is 'Not Guilty,' and the President will now restore his sword to the accused."

The remarkable feature of this light chatter was the fact that none but Randolph himself understood the tremendous significance of Cellini's use of a trick penny, while Aylmer was in quite as thorough ignorance of the gossip which connected his name with that of Lady Betty Luttrell. For this reason his friends were far more interested than he dreamed in the arrival on the scene of an unknown Rosalind. Obviously, they could say little. It was common talk in the town that the Earl's granddaughter and Mr. Richard Aylmer were carrying on a flirtation which was gall and wormwood to Lord Francis Grosmont. As the vernacular had it:

"Yon artist-chap hez fair put his lordship's nose oot o' joint."

At any rate, after a good dinner and a reasonable quantity of good liquor, Calvert, walking homeward with Aylmer, expanded sufficiently to ask which of the two girls, Lady Betty and Pamela Sturton, he preferred.

"Do you mean in physical attractiveness or in other qualities?" was the somewhat disconcerting reply.

"Well, if you differentiate at all you can hardly answer. I'm afraid it's rather like drawing distinctions between a sinner and a saint."

"Meaning that Lady Betty is the prettier and Miss Sturton the more amiable?"

"Now, listen to me, young fellow. I admit I tried to put you on the rack, but it by no means follows that I offer myself to the torturer."

"I think I understand. Surely my friends in Mountford are not so stupid as to imagine that I have any feeling toward either of the ladies other than a very real friendship?"

"You're a lucky young dog," sighed Calvert. "I wish I were your age, with convention dead as the dodo after a great war. How old are you? Twenty-five, I suppose. I'm fifty. Twenty-five years ago the world was in the Victorian period, and a nomad artist who made sheep's eyes at a peer's granddaughter would have been looked on as a dangerous lunatic. Yet I, too, had my dreams, even my deliriums. I knew a girl—her father was a Lord Mayor——"

Aylmer, lighting his pipe, stopped short in the road. They were descending a winding path which commanded almost the same view of the valley of the Slee as that which first met his eyes on approaching Mountford. Then it was day—now it was night—but the radiance of the moon, now high in the sky, invested the grim ruins beyond the river with an eerie beauty unknown to the all-revealing blaze of the sun.

"You mean well, Calvert," he said, thoughtfully. "I am only interrupting your tender reminiscences of the Lord Mayor's daughter because that mythical young person is nothing more than a red herring drawn across the trail. Now, I'll tell you something you may have guessed, but can hardly be certain of. Of course, there is no foundation for any foolish gossip concerning me and any girl in this place. The point is that I might add 'or else-

where.' I cannot get married. I would not dare. An eminent doctor in London told me in the plainest possible way that I am always in danger—daily, hourly danger—of madness or death. I have some sort of pressure on the brain, the result of a bad crash in France. I am well aware that the disturbance, whatever it may be, has affected my outlook on life. It has made me extraordinarily sensitive to emotional influences, such as music. I suppose it is part and parcel of the queer illusions which gripped me during the first days of residence in the Castle yonder. In a few seconds—now—this very moment, in fact—I could, if I yielded to the spell, walk on down this hill and see the moonlight glinting from the spear-heads and morions of sentinels on the walls, and hear the warders challenge at the gate before the drawbridge was lowered and the portcullis raised. I feel I can pass at will from the twentieth century to the times when, as the old chronicle has it, such fortresses were inhabited by devils and evil men. But I am sane enough in some respects, and I know that these pranks of the imagination are warnings of approaching disaster, so it would be the act of a vicious idiot to ask any woman to link her life with mine."

"I'm glad you've told me that, Aylmer," said the other with quiet sincerity. "I don't think your case is desperate. I should imagine— But, there! I am a layman, and dare not dispute with medical authority. However, I greatly appreciate your confidence, and shall respect it."

"What were you going to say—something about harmless delusions, I suppose?"

"Yes, in a sense. I gather that you have taken up drawing and painting quite recently?"

"Yes. I always dabbled in the arts, but was chiefly concerned with poetry before I dropped from the sky."

"Well, it seems to me that some slight physical shock, a fall or that sort of thing, might easily put you right."

Aylmer laughed cheerfully.

"If you see me preening myself before any good-looking female during the next few days, hire some strong-armed ruffian to give me the right kind of half-arm jab," he cried.

They parted a few minutes later.

While Aylmer was talking about Rosalind, Rosalind was talking about Aylmer. She, of course, imagined that she was guarding her words most carefully, and little imagined that her keen-witted auditor was aware of every mood that had troubled her since the hour—how far distant it seemed!—when she caught sight of Aylmer's work in the illustrated weekly paper. Thus, he was ready for her questions, and deftly headed her off the dangerous topic of Aylmer's likes and dislikes among the Pageant folk.

"I see little of them," he said. "We sing in the town at night, and I have not visited the Pageant field, though the director, Mr. Calvert, has promised our party four seats, or rather, standing-room in some privileged place, for the actual Tournament on Friday. Certain of the great folk have been pointed out to me, notably Lord Mountford, his granddaughter, Lady Betty Luttrell, and her reputed fiancé, Lord Francis Grosmont. To-night I shall meet the aristocracy of the county at the Lodge, because we are hired to give a concert there at nine o'clock. That is why we start an hour earlier in the town, seven instead of eight. . . . By the way, why not come with us?"

Rosalind's heart fluttered, but she protested that she could not appear in public.

"Again, why not?" he urged. "One of these young

ladies has a headache, and is hardly fit to sing. About half-past-eight, when it is dark, she can slip away with you to your lodgings. There you can exchange costumes. She will take herself off to the Castle and to bed, and you can join us in the market square. The moment you appear I'll break off the show, and we'll pack into the hotel 'bus, which I have hired for the evening. You will be dropped a few yards from your door about eleven o'clock, and can bring Miss Montgomery's pierrette rig to the Castle in the morning. It's as easy as falling off a log, as they say in New York."

"But what will Mr. Aylmer think?"

"What *can* he think? You are merely playing the part of the good Samaritan, which is not necessarily confined to the male sex. And Miss Montgomery is really ill. I tried to persuade her to remain away this evening, but she refused, knowing how appearances count in a small show like ours. But, I'll convince you," and he shouted to the three in front to halt.

Rosalind saw at once that the girl in question could only get through a long evening's work with an effort. So she agreed, though timorously, to play the rôle of understudy. When the heart is willing the more logical brain often gives in, and, when it comes to playing with fire, every woman is a born Salamander. Even Mrs. Barker aided and abetted the scheme. She was greatly interested in her lodger's transformation into the black and white costume of the actress, while the latter, though well aware that the newcomer far surpassed her in looks and style, had sense enough to realise that her own willingness to stand aside for that evening would strengthen her position in the troupe.

It was a perfect August night. The stored heat of the earth after a cloudless day made possible that rarest of

things in England, sitting out in the open air after dinner. The men were bare-headed, the women needed but the lightest of wraps around their shoulders. The house-party numbered about forty, and there were many guests from the neighbourhood. They were ranged in a semi-circle on the lawn and along a raised terrace which divided the gardens from the main rooms. The singers fronted their audience, and the rising moon, just visible over the hills, revealed the effective stage costumes but left their faces in shadow. The two girls wore black and white dresses, white and tasselled conical hats, black silk stockings and white shoes. Mannering was attired as a Pierrot. Cellini, of course, remained faithful to his quaint colour scheme. Sir Claude Berkeley, the only person present who actually knew him, saw at once how adroit the man was. In evening dress he might have been recognised by others, but the browns, yellows, and reds—not least the everlasting straw hat—formed the best of disguises. Few, if any, noticed the substitution of Rosalind for Miss Montgomery at first, a fact so unflattering to either of these young ladies that it need not be insisted on unduly.

Some did, however, suspect the change when the stranger sang "Santa Lucia." She, it will be recalled, had a singularly sweet and tuneful voice. A music-lover already, and keyed to the topmost pitch of emotion, she did not even try to resist the wheedling of Cellini's violin.

The opening lines fell on ears made expectant by the accessory charms of a moonlit night and a woodland setting.

Sul mare luccica
  L'astro d'argento,
Placida é l'onda,
  Prospero é il vento.

It was as though a silver-tongued nymph were chanting a lullaby. The illusion was heightened by the head of a marble satyr peering above a clump of shrubs just behind the singer, with its strange smile, compound of laughter and devilry, accentuated by the moonbeams. No Neapolitan ever lived who gave to the simple little ditty greater sincerity of feeling or depth of longing. She, a Londoner, who had never been nearer Italy than Boulogne, when the "Royal Sovereign" excursion steamer took her there and back one fine Sunday from London Bridge, warbled most convincingly of the age-long charms of Naples. She threw her very soul into the final verse:—

O dulce Napoli!
  O suol beato!
Ove sorridere
  Volle il creato.

She was helped admirably by the others in a concerted chorus, with violin and guitar accompaniment. Her hearers seemed almost unwilling to disturb the spell she had cast on them until the last thrilling call to "Santa Lucia" floated away in exquisite cadences into the silent places. Then, while enthusiastic applause startled far-off rooks and pheasants, Cellini spurred his new soprano to renewed effort by playing the opening bars of "The Song of the Telegraph Wire." Rosalind and he shared the secret of its authorship, and well he knew how she would respond to the curious humming lilt of the refrain. There were others who felt its compulsion. People sang who hardly ever sang before. Afterwards, some spoke of having been hypnotised!

All this partook, perhaps, of that passionate element in music which the girl herself had decried, and said she feared. But, when she was moved almost to tears, came

the real excitement of the evening. Cellini, ending on this note of high achievement, announced a brief interval. The whole party rose, and broke into chattering groups.

Lord Mountford and Professor Hartley-Browne, escorting the Marchioness of Castleton, strolled forward to congratulate the musicians. Somewhat puzzled already by the quality of the performance, the Earl told the others he imagined that this sweet singer had joined the troupe of wandering Minstrels that day.

"Ha, hum," said the Professor. "I am a child in such matters, but—er—I think I have read somewhere that a woman sings like that only when—er—she is—er—hopelessly enamoured of one of the opposite sex."

"It is difficult to distinguish features in this light," said Lord Mountford, "but I have a suspicion that, if you are right, some young man must be either booked already or infernally hard to please."

Lady Castleton passed no comment. She had just seen something which displeased her mightily. The Earl's keen old eyes detected Rosalind's identity forthwith.

"Hello!" he cackled. "Are you what is known in the profession as a quick-change artiste, Miss Jones?"

"No, sir," she replied, feeling that absolute candour would pull her through a ticklish situation. "I was acquainted with Signor Cellini already, so, when he asked me to take the place of one of the regular members of his company for this evening only, because she was indisposed, I consented. Indeed, I was very glad to help."

Lady Castleton was unfeignedly startled.

"Then you have met Miss Jones before, Mountford?" she gasped.

"By gad, I should think so, and it won't be my fault if we don't meet again. She's in a shop in London. What a crime! In a *shop,* with a voice like that, and a face

which, like Helen's, 'brought a thousand ships to Ilion . . .' Cellini! . . . where's that amazing fiddler? What's he doing to let a girl with such ability waste her days behind a counter?"

But Cellini was engaged in a sharp tussle of wits with Lady Betty. He heard the question, however, and shot a reply over his shoulder.

"Those whom the gods love die young," he said. "I want Rosalind to live."

"Rosalind!" exclaimed Lord Mountford, quite mystified now.

"My stage name, in a sense," explained the girl.

"Leave Mr. Cellini alone, old thing!" cried Lady Betty. "I'm trying to extract from him the true reason of Mr. Aylmer's absence to-night, and he's a perfect eel for wriggling."

Thereupon, the Marchioness was so annoyed that she lost her temper. She did not approve of her elderly friend's intimacy with strolling players, especially fascinating *ingénues* of Rosalind's type—since she was convinced that all men are fools and old ones superlatively foolish—but Betty Luttrell's outspoken anxiety in regard to the conceited artist person was quite distressing.

This time she meant to strike, and strike hard.

"My dear friend," she said in French, "I acquit you personally of any desire to hurt, but your granddaughter goes beyond all bounds. My son is angry with her already, and my tolerance is exhausted. If she will not curb her tongue in public——"

"Je vous prie pardon, madame," broke in Rosalind, *"mais je comprends, sans erreur, ce que vous dites."*

The accent was more accurate than the grammar, but the others understood that this pretty singer had behaved well in uttering such a warning. Hartley-Browne found

he had forgotten his pipe, but came upon it almost miraculously in a pocket of his dinner jacket when well out of earshot of the others.

"Holy smoke!" growled the Earl, "when I provided a concert for my guests I did not count on fire-works as well. . . . Betty, I wish to have a few words with Frankie —and you, too. Will you bring him here—at once?"

There could be no mistaking his intent when he spoke like that. His granddaughter went off without a word of retort. But the mischief had been done, and, as might be guessed, Cellini figured as the villain.

There had been no delay when the two met. If flint strikes steel the sparks fly, and the metaphor unquestionably applied to the vagabond fiddler and the heiress of the Mountford millions. Lady Betty opened the battle. She swept across the lawn the moment Cellini announced that the first part of the programme was ended, thus gaining a precious half-minute before she could possibly be interrupted, though the Marchioness noticed her action, of course.

"You live with Mr. Aylmer in the Castle, I believe, signor?" she began.

"*Si, signora,*" he said, doffing the straw hat with a fine air.

"But—you speak English?" she demanded petulantly.

"Oh, yes, more fluently than Italian even."

"Well, my Italian is decidedly weak . . . Where is Mr. Aylmer?"

"Dining with Major Randolph, miladi."

"Major Randolph! He, too, declined my invitation. Can you not tell me what is the matter with both of them, or, at any rate, with Mr. Aylmer?"

"I believe each is troubled with visions, so they are holding a *séance* in common."

"Please express yourself more plainly. I shall be quite grateful if you do."

They had drawn somewhat apart from the others, and their eyes clashed now in fullest comprehension. The girl knew intuitively that this man could peer into the hidden deeps of a woman's nature. The man, reading her unspoken thought, was asking himself how best he could serve his absent friend. Rosalind's arrival on the scene had upset all calculations. He had believed that neither Aylmer nor he would ever see her again, yet here she was a few yards distant, avid of every detail of her rival's looks and manner, and most certainly preparing to keep him on the witness-stand when Lady Betty had finished with him.

"Aylmer has not confided in me; he confides in no one," he said, "but, if you wish me to theorise, I am willing. I believe most sincerely that he is afraid of a certain lack of self-control making itself felt at an awkward moment."

"Do you mean that he is avoiding me?"

"You, or some woman—perhaps only an ideal one."

"Does she exist?"

"No. That is impossible. There never was, there never can be, an ideal woman. The very phrase mocks its supposed meaning."

Betty Luttrell was far too intent on her own desperate problem to be headed off by flippancy. Moreover, out of the tail of her eye, she had noted the approach of her grandfather and the others. She dared lose no time.

"He has said nothing which leads you to think that he is leaving Mountford to-morrow. or next day?" she said hurriedly.

"I am quite sure he is not. Rather is he looking forward eagerly to the clash of arms on Friday."

"Will you forget our little talk except to give him this

message?— Say I hope to drive him to the Lodge for tea to-morrow. I am not engaged in the Pageant, and would like to get away before the rush at the end."

"Certainly. Please trust me. I reached the age of discretion about the time you were born. That, of course, is a mere plea for sympathy."

"Then I can count on you as an ally, since we share the same need. Really, Mr. Cellini, I *must* see Mr. Aylmer to-morrow, and—I cannot—write."

At that moment came Lord Mountford's imperative hail, and she caught Rosalind's name when Cellini answered. Thereby fate intervened, since her principal representative in that small group of people had no notion that Lady Betty had ever even heard of the girl's existence.

"Rosalind!" said her ladyship instantly. "Is one of the ladies of your troupe a 'Rosalind'? "

"For this night only. One of my artistes is indisposed, so the Rosalind Lord Mountford alluded to was good enough to take her place. She only arrived from London by the evening train to-day. Perhaps the position may be clearer if I tell you that she, wholly by chance, appealed to his lordship to direct her to a lodging, and he most kindly brought her to the Barkers' cottage."

It was then that Betty was commanded to produce Lord Francis. Her brain was on fire with a perfect blaze of conjecture, but her heart was conscious of a sudden numbing. Certainly was she bereft of the power of ordered speech, so the ready obedience of her search for the man she was supposed to be engaged to was actually a frantic clutching at a straw as a respite.

She found him quickly. He was talking to Pamela Sturton and a couple of men from a Lancer regiment stationed in York.

"Frankie," she said, "grandfather wants you. I think he means chopping your head off. What mischief have you been up to?"

Those were the first civil words she had addressed to the unhappy youth during the past three days. Although she had driven him to the lodge from the Pageant field that afternoon it was only because she failed to find Aylmer, who had hidden in the crowd. Cellini was right. His friend dreaded the rapid growth of intimacy between this most attractive girl and himself. Whatsoever delusions his injured brain might harbour they had not yet taken the form of mental obtuseness, and he knew well that a heedless word, a chance opportunity, might bring about that which he would regard as an unutterable catastrophe—a moment of frenzy when he would tell Lady Betty she was the reincarnation of the dream-woman he had loved, and, perchance, won, many a century ago.

Grosmont sprang to her bidding, but, at Pamela's cry of, "Betty, just one sec.," he perforce waited until Pamela whispered in her friend's ear:—

"You're behaving like a frightful idiot, darling, but don't be quite so obviously one. Everybody guesses why you dashed after the Cellini man."

Betty's wits were in a whirl. For once in her gay young life she was at the mercy of an emotional tempest. It is probable that she was saved from a hysterical repudiation of Lord Francis Grosmont and his matrimonial desires then and there solely by the knowledge that the girl of whom Aylmer had spoken so regretfully was literally at her elbow when she and her *fiancé* neared the Earl.

The old gentleman wasted no time over preliminaries. He had controlled an industrial army in his time, and fancied that the straightforward method of settling disputes was effective with women as with men.

"Betty," he said, speaking determinedly, though lowering his voice, "I have been under the impression you were willing that your engagement to Frankie should be announced on Friday evening?"

"Good gracious!" she tittered, "are you telling me I am jilted?"

Her grandfather eyed her severely for a second or two. Then he turned to Grosmont.

"What's the trouble between Betty and you?" he demanded.

This was just one of the occasions when good breeding counts, even in a youngster not endowed with an excess of intelligence. Grosmont, of course, would rather die on the spot than blame the woman he loved.

"I'm not aware of any trouble, sir," he said, lying with a prompt cheerfulness that did him credit.

"My French is rather rusty," explained the Earl to Lady Castleton. "I fear I must have misunderstood you."

He, experienced man of affairs, refused to spare anyone. This annoying business must be probed into without respect to persons. The Marchioness, of course, had looked for no such direct attack, and the last thing she wished was to antagonise her prospective daughter-in-law.

"I'm sorry if I am mistaken," she faltered, "and I may be a trifle old-fashioned, but I really do think, Betty, you are keeping Frankie very much at arm's length these days."

Betty faced her tormentors fearlessly. That much might be expected of her. She was no puling wench ready to dissolve into tears when called on to meet a crisis. She smiled wickedly, and held out both hands to Lord Francis.

"Darlingest!" she cried, "these two old dears want us to play up. Come! Clasp me in your arms, and kiss me rapturously!"

Her forlorn admirer saw the mockery in her shining eyes. He hesitated, and was lost.

"If that's all," he said, trying to speak carelessly, "let's get back to our chairs. The show is beginning again."

"Damn the fellow!" muttered Lord Mountford to himself, "he bolted like a rabbit. Why didn't he take her at her word?"

"What's that?" inquired the Marchioness, who had not been so flurried during the past twenty years—never, in fact, since the noble Marquis, her husband, broke his neck during a fast run with the Quorn.

"Nothing much," came the answering growl. "I was just wondering which was the bigger pair of fools—the old ones or the young ones!"

CHAPTER XIII

GOOD INTENTIONS

Aylmer eyed Rosalind critically when he called next morning a few minutes before nine o'clock. He had never seen her in the searching light of the early hours, so, being very much of a woman with regard to her personal appearance as viewed by others, she actually thought he wanted to find out whether or not her very fine complexion was her own or a chemist's. As a warranty, so to speak, she blushed furiously under this intent scrutiny, though her face had a healthy glow already, due to a rapid walk to and from the Post Office, bent on telegrams Londonwards.

His first words undeceived her.

"You're a naughty girl," he said, "yet, though you ought to be ill, you don't look it. You pleaded weariness of body and surfeit of food when I wanted to take you out to a quiet dinner, yet I'm told you rushed off with Cellini and his gang to the Lodge, sang like a robin, gorged a heavy supper, and arrived home not long before midnight. Nice goings on! . . . Mrs. Barker, aren't you surprised and shocked at your lodger's behaviour?"

"Not I, Mr. Aylmer," retorted the Yorkshire-woman, herself guilty of adding to Rosalind's late hours by sitting up to hear all the girl could tell her concerning Lord Mountford's party. "The town's stannin' on its hëad this week, an' we reckon nowt of a racket that lasts all t'day an' half t'neet. An' what time did you get yam (home) yersen? None so soon, I'll be boun', if Tommy Trenholme was wi' ye."

"I was in the Castle before eleven of the clock," was the crushing reply. "Sergeant Jackson and I sat up and swapped yarns till the return of the revellers. Of course, I guessed what had happened when I heard that a young lady from London, whom Cellini met earlier in the evening, had volunteered to take Miss Montgomery's place. . . . Well, it was a kind act, Rosalind, and I'm glad you are none the worse for it. If I had known *you* were going to sing I'd have rushed our small gathering over to the Lodge, and stood among the lackeys in the background. Cellini tells me you made a terrific hit. . . . Are you ready? Miss Montgomery ate no dinner last night, so she demands an extra egg this morning."

"Is she really better?" said Rosalind, giving Mrs. Barker a smile of thanks for such ready championing as she went out.

"Of course, she is. Mrs. Jackson allows no one to be ill. She dosed me once with a concoction of dandelions and horehound, and I ate like a navvy next day. It is you I am concerned about. *Paté de foie* sandwiches and champagne—after a Yorkshire high tea!"

"You must have been up early this morning to have gathered all the news?"

"Not I. Cellini was brimful of your success last night. Are you thinking seriously of joining him?"

"Nothing on earth would persuade me to do anything of the sort."

She spoke stiffly. The mere question, with its casual friendliness, had the nearly paralysing effect of a piece of ice dropped down her spine.

"Well, I'm rather glad of that," said Aylmer, blithely unaware of any change in her tone. "This musical rambling about the countryside may be all right as a holiday in summer and fine weather, but it leads nowhere

professionally. You see, since I have earned money by my sketches I talk like a company director. But I'm chattering like a magpie, whereas I really want to listen. Tell me again why you are here. You led me to assume that you served behind the counter in some Oxford-street store, but it is evident your employers entrust you with more important work at times."

Rosalind did then shoot an indignant glance at him. Forthwith, she steeled her heart against any recurrence of the glamour which had overpowered her not twelve hours earlier when she sang of "Santa Lucia." She spoke like an ultra-genteel housemaid in telling how various little rills of chance had combined into the resistless stream which ultimately bore her North. She was literally dismayed by her own lack of enthusiasm, and found herself bitterly conscious once more that she had been hugging a delusion to her breast during those five weary weeks. In reality, her pride was hurt. Her words were prim and proper, and her manner quite "departmental." She was striving blindly to make the man she loved believe that he filled no greater place in her thoughts than shop-walker Tompkins, of the scarified elbow.

She succeeded too well. Aylmer, for his part, had indulged in some soul-searching musings due directly to Calvert's innuendoes of the night before. He felt that he was being drawn into a sex entanglement. Fully aware already of a growing liking for Lady Betty Luttrell's company, he was positively startled by the sudden and quite ardent desire to strain Rosalind to his breast when they met so unexpectedly in the Barkers' cottage. He was fortified now by high resolve. His relations with either of these young ladies—even with Pamela Sturton, who had favoured him with more than one demurely inviting look—must decline in future down a scale of Platonic dimin-

uendo. He would be relieved when Lady Betty's engagement to Lord Francis was formally announced, glad when they and the Sturton girl had gone to the grouse carnival in Scotland, and, perhaps, a trifle melancholy when Rosalind hurried away with her sketches and fashion notes. Indeed, he was sure he would miss Cellini more than any.

In another man such notions might well be regarded as priggish. In Aylmer they were the candid outcome of fear. Certain spasmodic relapses into his dream-state—momentary but phenomenally vivid glimpses of incidents which might be historic but were not recorded in any known history—had warned him that he was ever on the verge of some new and too potent experiences. He dreaded any prolonged submergence of his commonplace senses. He was almost convinced that if he abandoned himself completely to the craze he would never regain his wits, but become a maniac for the rest of his days. Sheer prudence dictated a Spartan self-control.

But he was an eminently sane young man that fine morning, and was quick to detect the abnormal in Rosalind.

"What has come over you?" he cried, when she brought a stilted account of her recent adventures to an abrupt end. "I remember you were inclined to be a trifle at loggerheads with the eternal scheme of things the first day we met. But that phase soon passed, and I looked for my Rosalind of the inn this morning after hearing Cellini's rhapsodies about the concert. Even Mannering, whose mental equipment is that of a banjo, was enthused by your singing."

"Rosalind of the inn has degenerated into Peggy Jones of the silks and ribbons," was the answer.

"Not in my eyes, but only in my ears," he retorted.

"Perhaps I am really a little over-wrought," she ventured.

"That is the penalty of the artistic temperament. But the ailment cannot thrive in this splendid moorland air. Each attack decreases in severity. Look at me! I came here a bundle of nerves, but, after a few strenuous tussles with myself, I'm a new man."

"It may have been because you have found a new interest in life."

"So have you. Isn't this Paris undertaking you speak of a great advance on the soul-destroying routine of Oxford-street?"

Rosalind converted a sigh into a hard laugh.

"Oh, yes," she said gaily. "It will be an education in itself. We may meet in London when you come there to interview your art editors and publishers, and you will probably find me quite a bright girl, decked out according to the *dernier cri* in fashion."

"Heaven forbid. I'd sooner see you in a neat overall, cooking a pie. Can you cook? Get Mrs. Jackson to teach you the true inwardness of beefsteak and kidneys, stewed in a deep dish and covered with golden-brown pastry. Escoffier himself could not surpass her in that concoction."

Now they were at the Castle gate. Aylmer opened the wicket, which had been left unlocked, and ushered his pretty companion into the fore-court. As he did so a strange sensation gripped him. Had he not passed with her under that frowning arch many a time before? She, vaguely aware of some change in him, turned and scanned his face. She was anxious, bewildered, and the touch of her hand on his arm gave him a queer thrill.

"What is it?" she said, rather breathlessly.

"Nothing," he forced himself to assure her. "This silly brain of mine grows dizzy at such sudden transitions from

brightness to gloom. . . . Ah! Here is Cellini, preceded by an incense of ham and eggs."

"So at last we are to share that long-deferred breakfast!" cried the violinist. "Fortune has robbed us of Celia, but, like all women, she can be fickle as well as unkind, so the missing member of the quartette may arrive for lunch."

He meant well. He was teasing them deliberately. He had no real knowledge of Aylmer's mental condition. He regarded his friend's vagaries much as an experienced horseman looks on the pranks of a shy but spirited two-year-old hunter being coaxed over his first fence.

"This young man is still a boy," he would have said, if asked to express himself in words. "He doesn't know what he wants, but I am greatly mistaken if there are not at least two women in Mountford who will enlighten him before the week is out. Between them, he ought to get a hard jolt. It will do him good."

So he was somewhat surprised at being answered by Rosalind.

"I am afraid Celia will not come here to-day, or any day, Maestro," she said coolly, meeting his cynical smile with candid eyes. "My visit is strictly professional, and I hope that in the excitement of yesterday's long journey and unusual happenings I did not lead you to believe otherwise."

"I see," he agreed readily. "That is the worst of sunshine and nine o'clock in the morning. Oh, for night and the moon!"

"Tell me, Cellini," laughed Aylmer, "which of us two is the crazier?"

"Can there be any doubt? I'm twenty years older than you, and exactly that much ahead of you in capacity for folly. Age does not connote wisdom. It was the grey

heads who plunged Europe into war. For a ripe idiot commend me to the man of fifty."

"I am almost certain," said Rosalind, "that the breakfast trail leads up those stairs in the corner."

"At last I am beginning to understand why women were given votes," cried Cellini, to whom the girl's attitude was momentarily inexplicable.

Could this be the same Rosalind who had bubbled forth her day's romance when they met, and who sang those little ballads of last night with such passionate intensity? Had the bee in Aylmer's bonnet buzzed so inharmoniously during the brief passage from the town that the girl was annoyed with him? Well, the point could be tested easily. He permitted a cheerful meal to near its end before springing a new trap.

"By the way, Aylmer," he said, "Lady Betty Luttrell wishes particularly to discuss some matter with you after the Pageant closes to-day. She wants to get away from the field well ahead of the crowd, and will drive you to tea at the Lodge."

"All right," was the careless reply. "We dine here at seven, Rosalind, so I'll call at the Barkers' place about half past six, if you don't mind walking with me in my stage costume."

"I'm practically engaged to-night, Cæsar," came the equally airy explanation. "Professor Hartley-Browne is dining with Sir Claude Berkeley in one of the local inns, and they have invited me to join them. It seems there is a balcony from which we can hear an admirable performance given in the market-place by a concert party from London."

Cellini cracked the fingers of his right hand loudly.

"Stung!" he yelped.

"How—stung?" demanded Aylmer, a trifle sharply.

"I should have said 'nearly stung.' There was a wasp in the jam."

"I suppose you met the Professor for the first time last night?" said Aylmer, turning to Rosalind with the manner of one wearied by the incessant jangling of bells on the jester's cap.

"No, not exactly. He was with Lord Mountford when I appealed for help in the matter of lodgings."

"I would never have credited the old chap with being so enterprising."

"He isn't, or wasn't. I think Sir Claude Berkeley prompted him."

"And who the devil may Sir Claude Berkeley be?"

"One of his Majesty's Plenipotentiaries and Ambassadors Extraordinary," broke in Cellini, rejoicing at Aylmer's quite evident discomfiture. "A high personage, I assure you—K.C.B., K.C.M.G., C.H., and a lot more of the alphabet—what the Americans call a 'regular guy.' Rosalind is mixing in the best of society."

"Good!" declared Aylmer. "I'll get the Professor to invite me, too. No archæological King Beaver is going to rob me of my best girl, or I'll know the reason why. If all else fails, I'll rope in old Mountford. And, perhaps, Lady Betty as well."

"That is simply impossible," said Rosalind, smiling demurely. "They cannot leave the Lodge, where they have a large house party."

"Then you don't really know either the Earl or his grand-daughter," persisted Aylmer. "If they want to eat at the Black Horse Hotel they'll do so, and let the other people look after themselves."

"Possibly Lord Francis Grosmont might be the most suitable person to arrange matters," said Cellini suavely.

"Oh, *that* conceited ass! He would upset every-

thing. . . . Have you really decided to go, Rosalind?"

"I think I ought to."

"You might have guessed that we wanted you here. But, never mind! If my scheme miscarries I'll come and glare at you from a solitary table."

"Better sing to her in her balcony," suggested Cellini.

Luckily, Miss Montgomery interposed, little realising that she was disturbing an atmosphere quivering with electricity.

"If you hadn't been such an angel I would have said it was horrid of you to come and hear me after scoring a terrific success in my place last night, Miss Jones," she cried.

"I'm not an angel, and I'm sure I had no thought of coming specially to hear you," exclaimed Rosalind.

Just too late, she caught the more obvious drift of her protest, and the discussion ended in a general laugh. But Cellini was delighted with the situation he had helped to bring about.

"Mannering," he announced, "I'll sing 'La donna é mobile' to-night. You can take the 'Pagliacci' Prologue instead."

Aylmer did then shoot an angry glance at him, but Rosalind vowed promptly it was a shame to expect her to pass her first fine morning in Mountford in eating. She wanted to explore the Castle, which she was sure, must be a wonderful old place. The other girls were ready to accompany her, being genuinely eager to know more of this London shop assistant whose musical gifts suggested an operatic "star" in the making, whereupon Cellini announced an instant rehearsal, so Aylmer was left an unfettered guide. He might almost have suspected that some unseen imp, bent on mischief, was plaguing him, for no more difficult hour could have been chosen in which he

would be compelled to discourse of Montfort and its mediæval grandeur to one so intimately bound up with the subject as was Rosalind, nor might the chance of the hour have allotted him a more provoking companion. But he was taking life so seriously just then that he actually welcomed this test of a new-born fortitude, and began talking to the girl convincingly about the domestic life of the Normans. He had astounded the Earl and Professor Hartley-Browne, but Rosalind became literally spellbound, for a time.

At first she was, of course, both interested and surprised. Indeed she listened in utter silence until a kindling in the speaker's eyes and a curious intimacy of phrase which seemed to indicate that he was describing something actually seen rather than visualised from written records induced a sudden feeling of alarm. She could not account for it, any more than one who wakes from sound sleep in the dead of night to find the heart beating frantically and every sense acutely alert may assign a reason for such symptoms of trepidation. At one moment she was enthralled by a vivid word-picture of a gathering of knights and ladies for a foray into the wooded valley with hawk and hound; in the next she was shocked by the terrifying conviction that Aylmer was completely out of his mind.

But this girl's eyes were piercing and her ears attuned to almost supernatural acuteness because she loved this man; and, if love be blind to faults, it is clear and penetrating as the levin-bolt when sympathy is called for. She knew that any attempt to play on his emotions would only add fuel to a blazing fire. She must sacrifice herself utterly if she would help. Every woman is something of a psychologist, else how should one so little acquainted as Rosalind with the hidden sources of consciousness and

thought decide instantly that nothing but the tritest of remarks would restore Aylmer's errant wits.

"Cæsar," she broke in, tuning her voice to a cheery note, "your talk is far too absorbing. You are making me forget my work. Won't you be good and kind, and dash off a sketch or two now? Then let us find someone who has the power to squeeze me into a corner where I can see the Pageant. It begins at half-past two, doesn't it?"

Never afterwards did she forget the way in which Aylmer looked at her. Though the sun was streaming gloriously over ruined walls and grass-grown courts the iris of each of his eyes was dilated noticeably. Evidently, his active mind was far away. She could see the change in his expression as he came back to actuality and the twentieth century. She understood, too, in some magical fashion, that her words had reached him across a dim abyss, and that he was striving with an intensity of effort that was painful to the beholder, to grasp their meaning. Fearful lest he should read the distress in her face, she turned and gazed down the valley, for they were standing then on the raised terrace of the Grand Escalier in the Upper Court.

"I am awfully sorry to have interrupted your thrilling story of those old days," she went on, speaking slowly, so that the simple significance of each sentence might penetrate the mist which enveloped him, "but we may have another opportunity of discussing Montfort and its dead-and-gone tenants. They are only ghosts, though you do make them seem to live again. Meanwhile, there are lots of things to do. Those sketches you promised me, for instance. May I watch while you draw?"

Aylmer literally shook himself. He caught her arm, half in earnest, half playfully.

"Rosalind," he said, "you *are* a dear!"

She trembled a little at his touch, yet did not flinch, realising that he had become her very loyal friend again, but nothing more.

"No," she cooed, with a pleasant little laugh which might have deceived even her mother. "I am just a business-like young person who is anxious not to fail in her first commission."

"Let us, then, leave the realm of make-believe," he answered. "These surroundings affect me absurdly. For a few minutes you and I were strolling through scenes of the forgotten past. Ghosts, did you say? Uncanny things, ghosts. I wish they had never been invented. Come along. I hear the twang of Mannering's guitar, and romance flies shrieking when he sings. You ask for sketches. You shall have all you want, provided the first is of you."

"Do you paint as well as draw?" she asked innocently, uttering the first words that came.

"Oh, yes; some stuff which surprises of itself. I'll show you. Better still, you shall sit under the oak with one of my monstrous colour-schemes in your hands. By Jove, I hope I can catch the delightful *moue* on your lips when you try to conceal your real opinion of the artist. I was mad as a hatter when I dashed off some of my daubs."

"It was all in the paper," she ventured. "You had a terrible fall in France."

He stopped short, for they had begun the descent.

"What's this?" he demanded. "What appeared, and in what paper?"

"Oh, you needn't think all the world doesn't know who you are," she said, deeming it wise to speak freely. "A London evening newspaper had the whole story last week. You are the 'Singing Poet,' and your exploits in the air are

still talked of. . . . Yes, indeed, Captain Aylmer, D.S.O.! The paragraph hinted that you would have got the V.C. if you hadn't taken such trouble to belittle your best efforts. But you couldn't dodge the D.S.O., because a divisional general was lying in the hospital near Amiens which you saved from a Hun bomb, and he was grateful."

He made no reply. In all probability he felt like a bat driven pell-mell into daylight.

"But I'm not going to ask you for stories of the war," continued Rosalind hurriedly, for his sudden silence troubled her. "I'm having a very agreeable morning with Mr. Richard Aylmer, the distinguished black-and-white artist, who will now exhibit some of his pictures before putting pen to paper."

"Ah, yes," he said confusedly. "Paintings, isn't it? They're in my room, I suppose. I'll fetch them."

The Minstrels were singing in the court-yard, but Cellini called a halt when the two arrived. Aylmer's abrupt dash for the stairs puzzled him.

"Is our genius more eccentric than usual to-day?" he inquired.

"No, Maestro. He is only bringing a portfolio," said Rosalind.

"Ah. Well, I am glad you and I have a minute to ourselves. Did you really mean what you said when you told us it was Sir Claude Berkeley who actually arranged to-night's dinner?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I never take a pretty woman's statements seriously," explained the cynic. "But I think you are right this time, as I can guess Berkeley's motive, apart from his natural desire to improve his acquaintance with you. He wants to pump you about me."

"About you?" Rosalind's astonishment was genuine.

"Yes. Tell him how we met. If he seeks your opinion of me, assure him I am a rascal."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," she cried indignantly. "You are a great artist and a born gentleman."

"Well, well. Those misleading labels will serve as well as any other. If he and the Professor bore you, come out and sing."

"I think I shall never sing again, Maestro."

"Oh, yes, you will. I speak from experience, having smashed two fiddles—a sinful waste—during similarly vain efforts to reform. If hell is paved with good resolutions what becomes of the bad ones?"

"I fear they pass into evil deeds."

"Tut, tut! my charming philosopher! Why this bitterness?"

"I am worried—about Mr. Aylmer."

"Lucky fellow!"

"Please be serious. He will be here in a moment. Does he give way often to these fits of—what shall I say? —strange imagining, trances, too active daydreams?"

Cellini raised his eyebrows.

"In all seriousness, I don't know what you are alluding to, unless it be his morbid fear of over-stimulation by music," he said.

"Then I must explain later," she murmured, for Aylmer was coming down the guard-room stairway. He seemed to have recovered his normal poise, and was in good spirits again.

"You haven't seen my masterpieces in oil, Cellini," he sang out cheerfully. "They will now be spread under the greenwood tree, and will arouse your worst passions, or I'm a Dutchman. Here you are! Not many, but mine own."

He spread out about half a dozen of his cloud and sky

effects on the seat beneath the oak, and the small party gathered round. Oddly enough, Mannering was the first to speak.

"By jing!" he cried, "I saw heaps of sunsets like that in Picardy. I was in the Air Force, and we used to carry out our best reconnaissances in the evening, spotting moving trains and troops on the main roads, you know. . . . Were you there, too, Mr. Aylmer?"

"Yes."

Mannering was about to say more on the topic, but caught Cellini's eye, and was silenced. Rosalind, looking at the same picture, found the comment which chased away fresh shadows from Aylmer's face.

"Surely that is not sunset, but dawn," she ventured.

"Go to the top of the class," laughed the artist. "But, first, tell us why you are right."

"Because the tints of dawn are pink, and delicious green, and the lightest of blue, whereas sunset reveals stronger colours—crimson, and scarlet, and burnished gold."

"Like this, for instance?" He lifted another canvas, of such brilliant and almost harshly contrasted tone-values that a silence fell on the group.

"If I were asked to give a title to that picture," said Cellini, "I would call it 'Paradise Lost.' "

"It—it almost frightens me," whispered Rosalind.

Aylmer moved uneasily, but he said, quietly enough:—"Not often may an artist boast of conveying his message so clearly. One can but interpret the mood of the moment, and I remember that sky flaunting itself a couple of miles above Armentières, while Inferno raged beneath. . . . I think I like your expression best with 'Dawn' in your hands, Rosalind. Won't you sit here—just so—with the light on your left? . . . If you are not

in a hurry, Cellini, talk to her. Everybody poses unconsciously when a sketch is being made."

He withdrew a few paces, and sat on a camp stool. Soon he was so absorbed that the girl said, in a tone which Cellini alone could hear:—

"Do you think it is good for Mr. Aylmer to be living in this old Castle?"

"Be a trifle more explicit, please," he countered.

"Well, he peoples it with those who lived hundreds of years ago."

"I have heard some tale of the sort in the town. Old Barker is a famous gossip, but I didn't credit one-tenth of what he said. Why do *you* ask?"

"Because he behaved so oddly a little while ago. He began quite naturally, with a description of the Castle as it used to be, but went off all at once into a fascinating yet altogether too realistic account of something which might be historical but which was then happening, before his very eyes, so to speak."

"Were you startled?"

"More than that—I was alarmed. I—I nearly saw the knights and ladies he was talking about."

"A mere trick of autosuggestion. I would recommend you to read Hood's poem 'The Haunted House.' You get the precise stage effect in the lines:—

> O'er all there hung a shadow and a fear;
> A sense of mystery the spirit daunted,
> And said, as plain as whisper in the ear,
> The place is haunted.

It is singularly consoling to find your worst suspicions confirmed by a humorous poet."

"But, please, Mr. Cellini——"

"Hi, you two!" broke in Aylmer. "I'm not drawing

Rosalind as the Tragic Muse! What on earth is that wretched fiddler saying to the girl that she should look so woebegone?"

"Then let me sing to her," came the retort. "I'll give you the chorus of an uplifting ballad popular in my unstained youth:—

> So what is the use of repining,
> For where there's a will there's a way;
> To-morrow the sun may be shining
> Although it is cloudy to-day.

Our minor poets would regard that as frightful balderdash, but it has a lot of sound sense in it, for all that."

"Obviously, your clouds are metaphorical."

"Not necessarily. There are clouds of the spirit as well as of the sky."

"Go away, you and your clouds! You are casting a gloom over a fair face. . . . Your left foot out another six inches, Rosalind. Excellent! Now I get the right sweep of your dress."

"You and I must contrive a heart-to-heart talk," said Cellini under his breath, stooping to pick up one of the paintings which had caught his eye. "Have you learnt any of the jargon of Christian Science? I believe honestly it would be helpful in Aylmer's case. He's mentally sick, but strong as a horse physically. He needs to be struck by the lightning in a woman's eyes."

"That is his disease, not his cure."

Then Cellini cackled derisively.

"You may be right," he said, "but I am quite certain that Lady Betty Luttrell did not kindle the fatal spark. . . . All right, Cæsar, I'm off. I have a date with Calvert. Bring Rosalind to his office when the sitting ends, and maybe he'll wangle a seat for her at the Pageant."

CHAPTER XIV

TIGHTENING BONDS

AYLMER had the journalistic knack of working quickly. When he was completely wrapped up in his subject, pen or pencil moved with a decision hardly to be looked for in an artist of so little professional experience. Probably, as his art mellows with advancing years, he may squirm at sight of some crudity of composition or even downright blunder of line or light in many of those early compositions: nevertheless, with more assured technique may also come a twinge of regret for the lost quality of a splendid audacity which had triumphed over all difficulties.

That morning, at any rate, he displayed his special gift before a most appreciative critic; though Rosalind probably had never read Ruskin on Turner, a woman's intuition more than supplied any deficiency in knowledge, and she understood at once why Aylmer had leaped into fame. It was so easy to interpret a message in which the craft of the artist was veiled by sheer simplicity.

He drew her seated, her body in profile, but her neck turned gracefully so as to show her face almost fully. He gave her a somewhat studious expression, as if she were both puzzled and slightly amused by the painting held in her hands, and from which she had just raised her eyes to look at the artist. In fact, a merry quip seemed to tremble on her lips. Above his signature he wrote those delightful lines of Wordsworth's, descriptive of womanly beauty:

> A countenance in which did meet
> Sweet records, promises as sweet.

He watched her narrowly when he handed over the drawing for inspection, and her faculties were so thoroughly and instantly occupied that she did not catch the satisfied smile of one whose judgment is proved correct. After a lightning glance at her own features to discover whether or not the sketch offered a recognisable likeness, and being apparently satisfied on that score, she examined her hat, shoes and stockings with the quick scrutiny of an expert. Assured that these details were correct and effective—and, indeed, Rosalind's ankles were slim and symmetrical, while she knew the exact angle at which any hat should be worn—she read the couplet.

It was well that Cellini's cynical eyes did not rest on her then, because she paled, whereas many a girl, thus flattered, would have blushed.

"It is wonderful!" she murmured, not daring to look up.

"If I can draw at all, why shouldn't it be?" he laughed.

"But—I am not nearly so pretty."

"Of course you are, and you know it. The literal fact is that I have not done justice to you."

"Honestly, is that how I look to you?"

"Well, if I sketched you twenty times I would catch twenty variations of expression—all equally effective."

She was silent for a few seconds. Then——

"Is this my very own?" she said tremulously.

"Absolutely—to have and to hold—from this day forth—the complete copyright."

"But—I am no judge—I think this is far better work than even your famous drawing of Lady Betty Luttrell."

"Yes," he agreed. "I have had more practice, and I took more pains . . . Will you have it published?"

"In my dress article, you mean?"

"Why not? I have seen no neater rig on any lady in Mountford."

Then Rosalind giggled rather cheerfully.

"It is nice to hear a man say such things when one feels that he actually means them. But we women know better. Let me enlighten you. This costume cost me four guineas. In our show-room it would be marked five and a half. If you think, Mr. Aylmer——"

"I hate even the necessity for thinking, Miss Jones."

"I beg your pardon, Cæsar."

"The incident is closed, Rosalind."

"Well, then, dear Cæsar, never again imagine that four guineas spent on a dress look like fourteen, much less twenty-four. They just—don't. At the Pageant to-day there will be dozens of women whose equally plain coats and skirts are four and five times more expensive than mine. And every woman can estimate the exact difference."

"Then we shall hie ourselves straightway to Director-General Calvert, and I'll hold his hands behind his back while you pick his pockets of a pass, so that you and I may parade the field together. You must show me the female plutocrats, and I'll caricature them."

"Oh, please, don't do that!" she cried, thereby innocently robbing Miss Smithers's catalogue of a place among famous first editions, for Aylmer's original grotesques are now worth far more than his orthodox work.

"They are not all Rosalinds and Lady Bettys," he reminded her.

"I'm sure there will be plenty of pretty girls there, if I am not straining after more compliments by putting it that way. But it is only eleven o'clock. Won't you begin one little drawing now? I want to watch you at work, I hope it won't worry you."

He returned obediently to the camp-stool, and Rosalind peeped over his shoulder. Though undeniably eager to

follow a sketch in the making, she still gave a peep or two at the charming study in her hand. She smiled to herself at the sheer absurdity of the conceit that this treasure should ever find its way into the pages of any catalogue. It was, in her child-like phrase, her "very own," and it would never part from her.

He used a pencil at first—dotting on the paper faint, spidery lines and indications of perspective of which she could make neither head nor tail. Then he took a pen, and there grew before her unaccountably misty vision a spirited study of a minuet danced by Queen Elizabeth, Rosalind herself, Sir John Froissart, and an archer in Lincoln green. He hesitated over this last.

"I fear I shall make a hash of my own phiz," he laughed. "Oddly enough, I can't visualise it."

"Won't you let me bring you a mirror?" she demanded breathlessly.

"I haven't got anything portable."

"Miss Montgomery or the other girl must own one."

She hurried off, and returned in a minute.

"Here is the very thing," she cried. "Where shall I hold it?"

He stationed her some few feet away, and, for the first time, studied his own reflection solely from the artist's point of view.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I was not aware of my cavalier aspect. If ever I attend a fancy dress ball I shall go as Prince Rupert. No harm in flying high, is there?"

It is more than likely that ninety-nine girls out of a hundred would then have said something about his exploits in the air. But the divinely maternal love of woman is more penetrating. Rosalind could not fathom the true reason of this man's dislike of all reference to his career

as an aviator, but she did understand its unsettling influence, and therefore avoided it.

"I am sure you would look well in that or any other costume of a period when men rode horses instead of snuggling under rugs behind a chauffeur," she agreed.

"Hullo! I thought all you modern girls loved motoring? You must meet Lady Betty. You ought to see her shoo Rolls-Royces and motor-cyclists out of the way when she drives a lively cob. She's the limit. I never sit behind her in a dog-cart that I don't review my past life so as to be ready for St. Peter with excuses."

"I hope she will not kill you this afternoon."

"What's that? Oh, I had forgotten the tea appointment. By the way, if we run into her while we prowl around for 'subjects,' I'll introduce you. She's a jolly girl—not a bit of a snob. Yet I think I like Pamela Sturton better."

"And who may Pamela Sturton be?"

Luckily, Aylmer was so busy that he failed to note a certain acidity in Rosalind's tone. Nor was this new petulance to be wondered at. It was bad enough that she should have to yield tamely to Lord Mountford's heiress, but the most angelic of tempers might well crack when a new and reputedly more attractive star rose thus suddenly over the social horizon.

"Miss Sturton! She's the daughter of some baron or other—I forget—anyhow, she's Lady Betty's great friend. Weren't they together last night?"

"I didn't see them. Lady Betty was—was busy as a hostess, you must remember."

Aylmer little guessed what a wrench it cost Rosalind to suppress her rather accurate knowledge of Lady Betty's special occupation at one crucial moment, at any rate.

"Did she, by any chance, pay the slightest attention to

her *fiancé,* Lord Francis Grosmont?" he asked irrelevantly.

"Not that one could notice it, except—except when Lord Mountford sent her for him in a hurry . . . Why don't you like Lord Francis?"

"The man is a prig, and a dangerous one, at that. He nearly killed Lady Betty while flying at Hendon the day I met you."

"Were *you* there?"

"Oh, yes. Grosmont and I had a bit of a row. He knew then he had taken an unjustifiable risk, yet can't forgive me for tackling him about it. He is always trying to pick a quarrel. If Lord Mountford were not such a jolly old scout, and nearly every other soul here quite decent, I would have scooted out of the place weeks ago. . . . Thanks. I've finished my portrait. You needn't hold that thing any longer. Now we'll suggest a background of the Banqueting Hall, and the thing is done. By the way, did the Normans indulge in such frivolities as minuets? I rather imagine they did not. But they've jolly well got to foot it this time. So, there!"

He had not the ghost of a notion that his careless words were alternatively caressing and stabbing his hearer. In one instant he was telling her what every girl likes to hear—that she was attractive and charming in face and manner—in the next he showed the greatest interest in Lady Betty, though contrasting her with some intruding minx named Pamela Sturton. Then he revealed that he had known Lady Betty before her, Rosalind, and her heart was still quivering under this cruel thrust when he stated calmly that it would have needed very little pressure to drive him away altogether from these sirens and their blandishments.

Rosalind ran through a whole gamut of suppressed

emotions. She was aching to ask more about Pamela Sturton when the visitors' bell rang at the Castle gate. The Minstrels had gone away quietly, so the two were alone in the Lower Court.

"If these are sightseers we'll hook it," announced Aylmer. "Thank goodness, this sketch is nearly finished! Do you like it?"

"I think," said Rosalind, with a desperate effort to control her voice, "I think, Cæsar, you must be a very good dancer."

"Delightful!" he chortled. "You have told me just what I wanted to know. Rosalind, what a life's companion you would make for a nerve-wracked idiot like me! Don't you agree it's a howling shame I should be condemned to a career of single unblessedness?"

"Who has dared to give that false verdict?" she contrived to gasp without undue flutterings. But the wicket door was open, and Sergeant Jackson came with a card.

"Sir James Macpherson to see you, Mr. Aylmer," he said.

"A Daniel—a Daniel come to judgment!" shouted Aylmer, springing to his feet. He ran, with outstretched hand, to meet a tall elderly man who, with a companion wearing plus fours, was advancing out of the gloom of the gateway.

"As usual, Sir James," he rattled on, "you are called on to pronounce the authoritative word in a diagnosis. Here am I, miserable wretch, telling a pretty girl that I can never marry, and, at the very moment she proclaims her scepticism, in you walk to confirm my statement."

"That's no the reason why I've come," was the dry reply, since the keen old Scottish eyes had noted Rosalind's flaming cheeks, even though her face was averted. "I'm stayin' in Kir-r-bymoorside, and hear-r-d some clack

aboot a mad airtist named Aylmer, so I kem te see for mysen if it could possibly be the Aylmer I kent sae weel."

"Whatever the reason I am exceedingly glad you've called . . . Rosalind, this is Sir James Macpherson, who mended my cracked skull in France, and knows the sort of chinks which still remain in it. . . . Sir James, be content to regard this lady as Rosalind, though the present age has christened her Peggy Jones."

The famous surgeon bowed.

"Believe me, young leddy," he said, "if this be Orlando he's no sae daft as he maks oot. But I'm the poorest of play-actors, so, if I may, I'll leave the stage for those better fitted to tread it. Let me introduce my friend," and he brought forward the local territorial magnate who had motored him to Mountford for the day's performance of the Pageant.

Aylmer, vaguely aware that he had almost transgressed the code of good manners by his singular outburst, broke at once into an explanation of the strange coincidence which had gathered together in Mountford so many people he had met on the day he left London.

Sir James, for his part, told how the magic carpet of chance had whisked him to Yorkshire, and took the opportunity to congratulate his one-time patient on a manifest improvement in health.

"You must be pounds heavier," he pronounced with professional solemnity. "That is all to the good. When you've been ill, never despise a little gain in weight. Shakespeare was right when he made Cæsar say:—

> Let me have men about me that are fat;
> Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights.

Why, what's the matter now?" for Aylmer rocked with

laughter, and even Rosalind's confusion vanished in a wriggle of amusement.

This led to the story of the formation and subsequent development of the troupe of wandering Minstrels. The visitors examined Aylmer's sketches, in both colour and ink, and were much impressed. Then the artist invited them to lunch with Rosalind and himself at the Black Horse Inn, where they could meet at one o'clock.

"I am taking Miss Jones to the office of our Pageant director," he explained. "She is here from London to collect certain data for a fashion article, and she must secure a seat for to-day's show by hook or by crook."

The gentleman in plus fours got in a word then. His wife had a headache, and her ticket was entirely at Miss Jones's disposal. Rosalind, however, was far too wise to permit of any pretence, even in such a trivial instance as this.

"Mr. Aylmer is always kind to his friends," she said modestly. "I am engaged in a London shop, and my people have sent me to Mountford to make notes for our autumn catalogue. I wouldn't have you think I write for a magazine."

But Plus Fours stuck to his guns valiantly. If he lunched with Aylmer he'd be dashed if Miss Jones didn't occupy that vacant seat. So Rosalind was destined not to meet Calvert that morning; hence, the latter, when requested, was altogether unable to point out the girl to Lady Betty that afternoon, though he had actually seen her in Aylmer's company before a bugle-call summoned the performers to their enclosure. This was just one of the tricks which fate delights in playing on poor mortals. Lady Betty wanted to sum up the interloper before she drove Aylmer to the Lodge, but never dreamed of looking for the pretty singer of the previous night in the front row

of a stand filled by county aristocracy and its friends. Plenty of eyes, of course, noted Rosalind, who was taken for the daughter or niece of Sir James Macpherson!

Naturally, Plus Fours knew everybody, so, when Rosalind sought the name of a girl dressed in nigger brown seated near Lord Mountford, he answered at once:—

"Pamela Sturton, one of Lord Southwold's daughters."

"Ah!" said she. "So *that* is Miss Sturton!"

"Yes. Haven't you met her?"

"No. I don't think she shops at our place."

Thereupon, Plus Fours laughed loudly. He was an excellent fellow, and had quite forgotten that this agreeable and sweet-voiced young woman was not of the Ten Thousand.

Rosalind followed the Pageant with the utmost zest. Aylmer had slipped into his uniform before escorting his friends to the White Horse Hotel for luncheon, so she could pick him out readily among the corps of archers. It delighted her to identify Sir John Froissart from her sketch the moment that genial historian rode into the arena, and she was glad to learn that Queen Elizabeth was a local milliner. Somehow, this fact enhanced the milliner's quite stately queenliness. She confided as much to Sir James, and the dour Scot advised her to read "Sartor Resartus."

"It's a book you hear little about in these uncertain days," he said, "but the world will come back to its Carlyles and Emersons when it sickens of scandal-mongers writing autobiographies."

Toward the close of the Pageant Rosalind kept a wary eye on the Mountford box. She saw that Lady Betty and Pamela Sturton were not much in evidence there during the second part of the programme, and did not show up for the grand finale, a march past of all the characters.

Aylmer had vanished, too. Doubtless, he was seated already in the lounge hall at the Lodge, or strolling in those beautiful gardens which had looked so fairy-like in the moonlight. She sighed. Sir James, who seemed to miss nothing, asked if she were tired.

"I think I am," she admitted. "I have been in Mountford just twenty-three hours, of which I spent seven in bed, and have contrived to pack a good many experiences into the remaining sixteen."

"Shall we go to the refreshment tent for a cup of tea?"

But Plus Fours vetoed the suggestion promptly.

"No," he said. "I'll find a pal of mine, and rush him home in my car. He can have his horse led, and we'll have tea in comfort."

The "pal" proved to be Major Randolph!

Meanwhile, Lady Betty Luttrell was enjoying—shall we say?—what she might have described as a hectic time if pressed for a definition. With the unwilling complicity of Pamela Sturton, who thought she had "played gooseberry" quite long enough, she picked up Aylmer, and dashed out of the Pageant Field before the procession was marshalled. Pamela, with the air of an early Christian martyr, elected for the back seat with the groom. Aylmer protested, of course, but the lady was firm.

"I'm not being polite," she said, smiling resignedly. "It's just a matter of 'Safety First.' Betty wants to talk. I can see it in her eye. If you sit here she will be turning her head constantly, while that fiendish cob does his regulation fifteen per through a crowded High-street. You must either get up there or drop me at the Cottage Hospital, as I shall be a nervous wreck when we have missed the twelfth child or dog by half an inch."

"I've never had the shadow of an accident—on my own side of the road," cried her friend.

"Nevertheless, I'll protect those helpless urchins and fox-terriers now," said Aylmer, mounting to Lady Betty's side.

"You know, of course, why I've grabbed you to-day?" was her greeting.

"Yes."

"Oh, do you?" She had not expected such a reply, and the dog-cart flew past the extended hand of a policeman signalling a van to pass the entrance gate. There was a shout, but no crash.

"Did someone yell 'Hi!' or something?" she demanded over her shoulder.

"The van-driver's remark sounded quite different," replied Pamela. "Whatever it was, he is still saying it. He's awfully interesting, too. He has a face like a blood orange. . . . Oh, William thinks he smashed his foot-brake."

"Tiresome things, vans! They never look where they're going. . . . So, Mr. Aylmer, you managed to read a good deal into my message?"

"Only that as I couldn't come to dinner last night your splendid hospitality suggested tea to-day."

Her lips tightened for an instant. This was no fit occasion for good-natured chaff, she felt. Still, she remained outwardly suave.

"I am really anxious to learn why you ducked our party," she said. "And who is this girl, Rosalind, who sings so well? Grandfather says she serves in a London shop."

"Any definite statement made by Lord Mountford is sure to be correct. Rosalind is really a Miss Peggy Jones, but, if the gods denied her a distinguished name they certainly favoured her in the more vital matters of face, and form, and certain attributes of art."

"Is she an old friend?"

"No. In a sense, I have known you longer . . . By the way, I rather like policemen. They're such useful fellows, and quite human. You just missed that one."

They were passing the Town Hall, where the traffic was somewhat congested; the constable controlling it was justifiably annoyed, and said so, at the top of his voice. Betty pulled up.

"William," she said, "give that man my apologies and half-a-crown."

The groom sprang down, and the cob, a well-mannered creature enough, consented graciously to await his return.

"My meeting with Rosalind and Cellini is a simple little story," explained Aylmer. "I promise to relate it in full if you consent to render our progress less erratic."

They reached the Lodge without further incident, but Lady Betty's curiosity was whetted, not relieved, by Aylmer's confidences. The topic was dropped during tea, which was served without delay. No one was pressed to partake of a second cup.

"The gang will be here in a few minutes," was her ladyship's tactful comment at this stage. "Let's stroll round the lake. Coming, Pam?"

"No, darling," said Pamela. "I've letters to write."

"Dreadful!" cried Aylmer. "I really think we ought to stop and help you."

"Please, don't. You might rob me of half of what I shall have to say."

With that Parthian shaft Miss Sturton vanished. As the two entered on a rolling lawn flanked by splendid elms, with the waters of a shallow lake sparkling in the sunlight two hundred yards away, they heard a motor-horn in the distance.

"That's grandad's Klaxon tooting before the car turns

into the park," said the girl. "We hopped it just in time."

It has been seen that by some mental process akin to the swing of a pendulum Aylmer's wits were markedly normal and alert after he had experienced one of his super-romantic day-dreams. At that moment he was singularly wide awake. Hating all pretence, he decided at once to bring Lady Betty to the point rather ruthlessly.

"I suppose we have, as you say, hopped it for some good reason?" he agreed, and the mere question in his voice might have been sufficiently disconcerting to one who did not know her own mind. His hearer, however, had mapped out a line, and meant following it, no matter whither it led.

"Yes," she replied, halting to light a cigarette. "Haven't you brought your pipe? Please, smoke. It isn't at all out of keeping with your sporting rig. . . . Well, the present plan is that all we younger people in the Lodge leave for the North on Monday or Tuesday, and I am simply aching with curiosity to understand you better before we part. You see, we may not meet again for such a long time. . . . No, don't interrupt. I want to make things clear. Why are you so mysterious? One day at Hendon, when Frankie nearly killed me—I knew all about it at the time—you jumped into the enclosure, rubbed Frankie's nose in the mud, and jumped out again. Then you come here—quite by accident, of course—and not only make yourself indispensable, but behave and talk so queerly that every soul in the place is—how shall I put it?—both fascinated and repelled. Grandad and the Professor discuss you morning, noon and night. Mr. Hartley-Browne says there has been nothing like you since the Rosetta Stone, whatever that may mean. People rave about your paintings and drawings, yet are puzzled, and, like me, almost distressed, by your supposed pacificism, until a news-

paper tells us you have a wonderful record as an aviator during the war. . . . Hush! I've not finished yet. If all this were not sufficiently bewildering, there arrives Cellini of the iron hand and the magic fiddle. That man is a real necromancer, and he turns out to be your friend! To round off the riddle, like the last verse of an acrostic, so recently as yesterday a young woman hies to Mountford from some shop in London, and sings angelically merely because another girl happens to fall ill. I suppose you think you have answered that part of the conundrum already, but I don't admit it. Cellini is here, Rosalind is here, you and I are here—just like the ordered characters in a play, yet—if rumour does not misrepresent things frightfully—you are convinced that all of us were here six hundred years ago, and considerably mixed up at that. Can you wonder if I am perplexed? If I have gone rather out of my way this afternoon to secure the quiet talk with you I had promised myself for last night, it is not altogether surprising, is it?"

Not often had Lady Betty made so long or so coherent a statement. She was intent on arranging her facts and watching her words, and was not aware of the slight tremor which shook the man when she spoke of his delusions. For a second or two he hovered on the verge of the realm of unreality he had entered so often of late. Here was he, wearing the costume of a bye-gone age, treading the immemorial turf of an English park by the side of a dainty creature whom he was almost convinced he had loved and won during a generation which had long since mouldered into dust. What matter if she were attired in the garments of to-day? A beautiful and attractive woman makes the same appeal to her lover whether she be arrayed in mediæval hand-spun silks or in the fabrics of modern Manchester.

He was saved by his pipe, which, in the manner of pipes, demanded a second match. The trivial action, performed subconsciously, swung him back from the half-opened gates of vivid if disordered visions which he could not distinguish from memories.

"So little surprising," he said slowly, hardly daring at first to trust an unruly tongue, "that I may need not one cup of tea but a round dozen before I succeed in persuading you that I am only an ordinary human being who had his head broken because he was a good deal of a fool and a dreamer, and whose folly and dreams have not been cured but gravely accentuated by a nearly complete physical collapse. Sometimes, Lady Betty, I go bang out of my mind. I nearly did so a moment ago."

"A moment ago?" she mused aloud.

"Yes, literally."

"After I had finished my little speech?"

"The direct outcome of it."

"Was it when I spoke of things which seem to have happened in the Mountford of old?"

She was being cruel, purposely so, since the vagaries of the feminine temperament permit of a close alliance between cruelty and love; but sheer astonishment rescued Aylmer from any emotional lapse.

"How on earth do you know that?" he almost gasped.

"Because—because I think I remember every word you have ever said to me, and every word I have heard which you are reputed to have said to others. Why should I scheme and contrive for an uninterrupted talk to-day if I were not deeply—interested?"

Her tone was thoughtful, friendly, sympathetic—nothing more, she would have protested vigorously. Yet it was well for Rosalind's peace of mind that three miles of solid Yorkshire intervened between the tea-party in

Major Randolph's house and the strollers by the lake. How she would have writhed at the sound of Lady Betty's measured accents! How accurately she would interpret their true intent, even though her rival's instant and scornful repudiation of other significance than the obvious one might be honest enough!

"I have often heard of the marvels of women's intuition," said Aylmer, "but this is my first actual experience of its uncanny accuracy. I am sure you mean well, yet I must warn you that you are stirring deep waters, in which strange creatures of the imagination move and have their being."

She smiled confidently, lifting her eyes to his, and there was a tenderness around her lips which was not only alluring but tantalisingly reminiscent of the woman he had embraced in his dreams. That way madness lay. At all costs he must resist the impulse which bade him clasp her to his breast, and whisper that his lost love lived again in her. Did she fear, or hope, that he would do something of the sort? Who can tell? Not Lady Betty, to her dying day!

They were now on a path bordering the lake. Sometimes it passed through a thicket of trees and shrubs; more often it was open, with a warren on one side and beds of osiers on the other. A startled rabbit scampered in front of them, and a lordly pheasant clucked loudly as he hurried to a distant wood.

"I feel that," she murmured. "If I did not, do you think I would have spoken so candidly? Indeed, indeed, I do not want to give you pain, but to help, perhaps remove some of the causes of your worry. I am inclined to believe that you are too self-contained. Don't you realise that you may benefit by discussing these things freely? Surely it would have avoided many complications had you come

among us at first in your true character? And is it not probable that you may save yourself some suffering—to say nothing of others well disposed towards you—if the dragons you have just hinted at are routed out into the light of day—of such a heavenly day as this, for instance? They may prove not to be dragons at all. The cheery noise made by that pheasant would be positively nerve-wracking at midnight, you know."

Here, with a vengeance, was a new Lady Betty—no longer a flippant and elegant society butterfly, but a warm-hearted and gracious woman! The man nearly yielded. It was tempting to believe that he could safely pour his troubles into ears so ready to listen. Their future lives, the lives of others, trembled on a scale more delicately poised than any agate balance known to science. Then they turned at the sounds of running feet. It was Pamela Sturton, speeding like Atalanta.

"Betty," she cried. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but it had to be either I or the butler, and butlers are so crude sometimes. Lord Mountford wants you immediately. And you, too, Mr. Aylmer. I might have pretended I didn't know where you were if a peeping housemaid hadn't seen you going down the avenue. And you can swear at *me,* if you like, can't you, Betty? If a few rich and fruity words will do you any good—shoot!"

CHAPTER XV

A CRASH

BETTY'S eyes sparkled wrathfully. She might even have cast off the cloak of Vere de Vere by confusing Pamela with the tell-tale housemaid if Aylmer had not reeled. He put one hand to his head, and caught a low-lying branch of an oak with the other, else he would have fallen.

Pamela rushed forward.

"Oh, what is it?" she cried, clutching his arm.

He blinked a little, and straightened himself with a wry smile.

"I am subject occasionally to a slight attack of vertigo," he said, a statement which would have sounded far more accurate in Sir James Macpherson's ears than in his own. "It has passed now completely. Please don't be alarmed on my account. I may not wobble again for weeks."

"Why didn't you tell me you were tired?" said Lady Betty solicitously, setting aside, for the moment, her firm resolve to repay Pamela in full not only for breaking in so dramatically but also for this added offence in being the first to notice Aylmer's collapse.

"I'm not tired," he protested. "My silly old brain won't behave. That's all. Let's go and see what Lord Mountford wants."

He seemed almost to resent his companions' anxiety, and walked on a few yards, being apparently most concerned about loosening the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe.

"Been rushing your fences, Betty?" whispered Pamela.

"Perhaps. But it was a strictly private performance."

"So I guessed, you cat. That is why I wouldn't let the Earl come. He was rather bent on it. I invented the butler."

Betty softened.

"Don't be angry, dear!" she murmured. "I'm just a bit over the top to-day, and that's a fact. . . . Mr. Aylmer, if you run away now Pam will think you and I have quarrelled, and it isn't so, is it?"

"I wished to make certain the dizziness had gone," he replied. "All is well, I assure you. It would have been quite exciting if you two felt compelled to frog-march me to the Lodge."

"A little later I shall have to persuade you to seek professional advice about those seizures."

"I am in the skilled hands of Sir James Macpherson, the greatest living alienist."

"What has that got to do with it? You're not an alien."

Aylmer grinned joyously, so it was evident that his senses were fully restored once more.

"Sorry," he said. "I was using a polite term for insanity."

"I don't know how you can be so horrid. Insanity, indeed!"

"I hate the word myself. That is why I try not to use it. But 'facts are chiels that winna ding,' whatever 'ding' may mean."

"It means something silly if it implies that you are likely to become a lunatic."

"Perhaps I had better explain. I suppose one goes out of one's mind because, for some purely physical reason, the friendly and normal relations between different sections of the brain get upset. That is exactly what has happened in my case. There can be no shadow of doubt that a certain rearrangement of my faculties was effected

by a fall into a gravel-pit in France. Nature, assisted by a skilled surgeon, endeavored to put matters right—with only partial success. I feel, indeed, I know, that some time there will be a frightful struggle between the organs of reason and unreason in my poor head, and the outcome is quite uncertain. . . . By the way, Miss Sturton, have you any idea why Lord Mountford wishes to see us so urgently?"

"Yes," said Pamela. "I think he, too, is suffering from a brainstorm. As for Frankie——"

"Don't try to be clever, old thing," broke in Lady Betty tartly, being irritated anew by Aylmer's evident desire to shut off any further discussion of his personal affairs. "If you know what granddad has on his mind, tell us."

"It is so difficult for a girl nicely brought up as I have been to put Lord Mountford's expressions into the English of John Bright," explained Pamela. "Didn't you say something once about Miltonic adjectives, Mr. Aylmer? Well, I rather fancy the old gentleman has been collecting a few. However, here he comes, and I'm sure he is ready to speak for himself—and others!"

The three, taking a short cut, had been in sight of the Lodge for a minute or so, and Lord Mountford, walking with a surprising swiftness that belied his age, was coming to meet them. He was yet a hundred yards distant when the drone of a fast-moving aeroplane reached the ears of all four. They halted, and looked up, and even Aylmer was puzzled by the sight that met his eyes. A monoplane was rushing towards them at great speed, seventy or eighty miles an hour, and taking a long slant earthwards from a height of a thousand feet. Through the slight haze of the whirling blades of the tractor the rays of the setting sun were reflected by some shining object which

appeared to occupy the pilot's seat. When a sudden bank brought the machine into profile the inexplicable glint became almost dazzling.

"I do believe it's that idiot, Frankie, in full armour!" cried Betty, who recognised the plane.

"Which is full—Frankie or the armour?" demanded Pamela.

The aviator had seen them as he turned, and now wheeled again into a loud swoop across the park. He passed between the three young people and the Earl, and waved a mailed hand at them. At that moment he was not more than fifty feet from the ground, and had but a fraction of a second to tilt the planes if he would clear the line of tall elms which led from house to lake. Then the engine failed.

"As usual," said Aylmer, not knowing he was speaking aloud, "history repeats itself!"

Betty would have asked what he meant were she not fascinated by Lord Francis's frantic effort to surmount the lofty barrier in front. He lifted the tractor and body of the machine over the topmost branches, but had just lost the fraction of speed which would have enabled him to climb high enough. The tail caught, and was torn off with a rending noise which merged almost instantaneously into a sickening crash.

Aylmer, whose momentary indisposition had been induced by other causes than those he had described so glibly, was again in possession of all his physical vigour. He out-distanced the two girls, and was the first to see the crumpled plane lying at the farther side of the avenue. His trained eye sought for a resplendent figure stretched stiffly among the wreckage, but it was not there, and a voice reached him from the midst of a towering tree.

"Rotten luck!" it shouted querulously. "I seem always

to come a cropper when you are anywhere around. Tell the girls and Lord Mountford I'm all right, but I can't climb down in a coat of mail. In fact, just where I am I daren't let go. Will you send some gardeners, with a long ladder and a rope? They'll get me down somehow."

It was evident that Lord Francis Grosmont, feather-head though he might be, was no puling coward. In this unforeseen crisis he had acted with audacious courage. When his falling machine crashed into the second row of elms it hung for some seconds among the branches which its weight and impetus had displaced. He promptly seized one of these, and, as the plane dropped from beneath him, swung himself into comparative safety against the upper bole of the tree. Nevertheless, he was fifty feet above ground level, and there was a long stretch of disconcertingly smooth trunk between his feet and the next series of limbs. Yet it could not be said that he was a ridiculous or even grotestque object perched up there like some golden image. A pious Hindu would have taken him for a manifestation of the Gautama Buddha, and a votive shrine would have decorated the sacred spot within a year.

Aylmer was as cool as though the incident had happened in France during a fight in the air.

"Right-o!" he sang out, and faced the three panting and distressed people who had already discovered the broken plane, but knew no more.

"Grosmont has escaped without a scratch," he said, staying their frenzied haste with uplifted hand. "Please don't hurry. He is really quite safe!"

Lady Betty, catching sight of the gallant knight in mid-air, with his legs crossed Crusader-wise on the trunk of the elm, and his mailed elbows supported by two small branches, burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

"How clever of you, Frankie!" she shrieked in a shrill falsetto. "Is that one of the new stunts you have been learning? But why spring it on us so unexpectedly?"

Lord Mountford wheezed up. He had not travelled so fast on his feet for many a year. He gave both Lord Francis and his granddaughter a glance of fury, and then spluttered at Aylmer:—

"I think—every—damned one of us—is bewitched!"

"I'm inclined to agree with you, sir," was the calm reply. "Meanwhile, if you three will remain here, and persuade the somewhat heavily clad gentleman in the tree not to dream of relaxing his grip till assistance arrives, I'll run and collect a ladder and some of your men."

"What we really want is a motion-picture operator and a gang of reporters," snorted the Earl. "That infernal idiot up there set the whole town on fire by announcing suddenly that he meant to fly in armour. He thought he would attain immortality by being the first Norman Knight to mount to the skies, as most of them seem to have vanished in another direction. . . . Pamela, you go with Mr. Aylmer, and bring the gardeners here. . . . You, Mr. Aylmer, must take my car and rush to the Pageant Field, where the Marchioness of Castleton will be in a state of collapse by this time, as her fool of a son promised to return at once after circling the Lodge. . . . No, Betty! You stop just where you are! I want you particularly, here and now!"

Aylmer, the only self-possessed person present, ascertained from Lord Francis that he could hold on comfortably for an indefinite time. Then he hurried after Pamela, and overtook her in a few strides.

"Did Lord Mountford wish us to hail the daring aviator from the topmost turret—or what?" he enquired nonchalantly.

The girl took thought before she answered. Even when she spoke she disregarded his question.

"I suppose you really are a little mad," she said.

"More than a little."

"Well, try and pull yourself together. Are you going to ask Betty to marry you?"

"Such a fantastic notion—" he began, but checked the words on his lips, since he became suddenly and quite disconcertingly aware that what he was about to say would not be true.

"I tried to explain a few minutes ago, if only by inference, that I cannot possibly seek such an honour," he amended himself.

"Well, you may know your own mind, but Betty certainly does not know hers. I supose, even if you *are* a sort of modern Sir Galahad, you cannot help being aware of the conventions in such matters. Within forty-eight hours the engagement between Betty and Frankie, which is a recognised fact already, will be announced publicly. Half the county will be here on Friday night. The butler is in quite a panic about the affair already, and has sent to York for another gross of champagne glasses. Now, put yourself in Lord Francis Grosmont's place. How would you like your fiancée to go careering off on every possible opportunity with a handsome young artist of a romantic disposition, who acted as though he were violently in love with the lady but dared not avow a hopeless passion—all in the best operatic style?"

"Not being Lord Francis, I may take it I figure as the handsome young artist?"

"Oh, yes. For the purpose of the argument I stick to my description."

"I was not quite sure, since you have erred so greatly in the rest of your analysis."

"Have I?"

"I—I think so."

"Not so positive as you may have imagined, eh? But it is high time you did your own analysing, if you don't like mine. Lord Mountford came home in a towering rage when he heard Betty had snatched you away from the Pageant Field."

"You were with us."

Pamella Sturton laughed angrily.

"You're rather impossible!" she cried. "We'd better part here. I'll find the gardeners. If you go round by the drawing-room windows you'll come on the car."

"No," said Aylmer, with a placidly determined tone which both startled and awed his somewhat excited companion, for Pamela Sturton's heart was acknowledging an unaccustomed strain. "You will go to Lady Castleton in the car. I remain here, and take charge of the rescue operations. There must be no hitch, now."

"But——"

"Of course, I have no right to order you about, yet I hope you will at least oblige Lord Mountford by sending someone to convey his message if you decline to carry it yourself."

"I'll do anything—in reason. But I must ask you what you mean. Something may blow up."

"There will be no fireworks, I assure you—not even a penny squib. If I have been wrecking two fresh young lives I'll endeavour to save the situation, as we used to say in France."

"Mr. Aylmer," and the girl's eyes filled with tears, "for Heaven's sake do not misunderstand me! I—I—don't profess to read your mind, or Betty's, or Lord Mountford's, if it comes to that. But I do implore you to face the facts squarely, and then act, not on impulse, but as

your heart directs. Don't shirk a decision, I mean. That is all."

"I'll promise that," he muttered, leaving her abruptly.

He believed he had caught a glimpse of some hitherto unfathomed deep in the soul of yet another woman, and the half-knowledge was vastly disturbing. Luckily, however, he was compelled to bend his wits to actuality, since there was no one ladder among the appliances of the Lodge which would extricate Lord Francis from a precarious perch. It was as well, perhaps, that he could not see the hard and somewhat unpleasantly cynical smile which chased the emotion from Pamela Sturton's agreeable features as she made her way to the waiting car. She had the aspect of one who, after imagining vain things, had been brought back to stark reality. In effect, she was a physician swallowing her own nostrums.

When Aylmer led a cohort of helpers to the foot of the elm Lord Mountford eyed him sourly.

"I rather looked for exact compliance with my wishes this time," said the old gentleman, speaking with cold distinctness. Betty, flushed and bright-eyed, had lighted a cigarette, and was chaffing her promised husband rather mercilessly.

"Your instructions have been carried out, sir," said Aylmer, meeting a fierce glare with an almost irritating coolness. "Miss Sturton has gone to reassure Lady Castleton. I found the means of rescue rather inadequate, so thought it best to take charge, as I have some experience of these accidents. It is surprising that you have no ladder capable of reaching the roof of your house. What in the world will happen if ever you have a fire at your place? These twenty-five-foot ladders are just right for picking fruit. . . . You comfortable up there, Lord Francis? . . . Very well. Don't attempt to move until I

tell you all is clear. That is to say, don't assume your descent is safe because there is a ladder alongside you. . . . Now, you fellows—up with the first ladder, and tie it firmly to the tree!"

In a few minutes he had four ladders arranged on the system followed by a steeple-jack in climbing a tall chimney, while a rope under the aviator's arm-pits helped to take off the weight of the coat of mail, which was no make-believe protection, but a genuine suit of armour worn in battle when men entrusted their lives to such trappings.

It was a neat piece of work, yet Lord Francis made little of it when he stood in safety among his rescuers.

"I think I could have shinned down if I cared to take a chance," he said carelessly. "Got a cig, Betty? Mine are mixed up with the wreck of the plane."

"It would be interesting to know if you are trying deliberately to break your neck, Frankie," growled Lord Mountford, who had followed Aylmer's manipulation of ropes and ladders with an appraising eye.

"No," laughed the younger man. "It was just sheer ill-luck. Who'd have thought the engine would stall at that particular moment? Even so, it was a matter of inches whether or not I cleared the trees."

"In a light monoplane it was more a matter of the distribution of weight," said Aylmer. "Why did you come so close to the ground? Will you never learn that a high-velocity engine is meant to operate in high altitudes?"

"Dash it all!" protested Grosmont, flushing with vexation, "if half what they say about you is true, no one knows better than yourself that this mishap was a rotten fluke. The chances were a thousand to one against it."

Aylmer smiled unconcernedly. He turned to Lady Betty.

"For goodness' sake," he said, "don't let Lord Francis

persuade you to take a honeymoon trip by air. I'm not quite sure which is the more dangerous—his handling of an aeroplane or yours of a mettlesome cob. May I recommend both of you to do as I do—walk?"

Lifting his forester's hat, he strode off without another word.

"I thought I saw Pamela—where is she?" enquired Grosmont, after an awkward pause.

"Gone to tell your mother you are still alive," snapped Lord Mountford. "May I ask if you intend to carry on in this hare-brained fashion after you are married?"

"I'm very keen on aviation, sir," said Grosmont, "but, if Betty objects——"

"I, dear old bean?" cried Betty. "Not on your life! When you have your grand smash I hope I'll be with you. We may as well hop it that way as any other, eh, what?"

Lord Mountford left them, and started in the direction of the Lodge. He looked very old and forlorn as he hastened across the park, and the girl was seized with an overwhelming compunction.

"Don't overtake us, Frankie," she said, with a winning smile which she well knew would reduce the youngster to fatuous obedience. "You can't move fast in those trousers, and, in any event, I suppose you should tell the men how to dispose of the wreck."

She raced after her grandfather, and linked an arm in his.

"Are you still vexed with me, old thing?" she whispered.

"Don't you realise, Betty, that you are all that is left to me?" he said mournfully. "My son died for his country, and I bore his loss with a stiff lip, but it cuts me to the bone when I hear his child speak so heedlessly of life and its obligations. I don't suppose for a moment that

you really want to fall from the clouds with Frankie, but I am almost persuaded you do not wish to marry him."

Betty said nothing, at first. Her pride was hurt. If Aylmer could have overheard her words she would have protested her readiness to wed Lord Francis as soon as a license was obtained. To her grandfather she could not be otherwise than candid, and candour was an unattainable ideal at that moment. The tall archer in green, just then disappearing behind an angle of the garden, had turned her down unmistakably after being on the verge of a passionate proposal, yet her woman's heart told her that he was considering her rather than himself, a belief near enough to the truth to deceive a far more acute observer than an impulsive girl who had been taught to regard the whole of her small world as at her feet. Still, she knew that nothing annoyed Lord Mountford more than dogged unwillingness to discuss a difficulty, and she forestalled the imminent outburst by saying:—

"I have tried to play the game always with you, bestest of grandads. And I'm not happy about this marriage business, I admit. I like Frankie. He has his good points, but—but——"

"Haven't you let matters go too far to draw back now?"

"Perhaps. But it's better for all parties if I shy at the first fence rather than come a frightful purler later."

"Betty, please drop these sporting metaphors. Married life isn't a steeple-chase."

"Dearest, you don't read the newspapers."

"Neither do you, I hope, if you are alluding to the divorce cases which occupy so much space."

"They don't interest me. But isn't there something about love in the marriage service?"

"So you think you don't love Frankie, and never will love him?"

"I—I don't know."

"If Mr. Richard Aylmer asked you to marry him, what would you say?"

"That's not to be thought of, old dear. He simply daren't marry anybody, because he is afraid of becoming loony at a minute's notice."

"Ah. Did he himself tell you that?"

"He—hinted at it."

"And what sort of hints were you throwing out to induce such a confession?"

"Pamela Sturton heard what he said, too," protested Betty.

"What? Are the two of you setting your caps at him?"

"Dearest, isn't that a trifle unkind?"

"The truth is often distasteful. Why are you fencing with me, girl? I am only putting into plain speech that which everyone in Mountford is implying by nods and winks and open guffaws. What caused Lady Castleton to grow white with anger last night? Why did you whisk Aylmer away from the Pageant Field an hour ago? Why did Pamela lie one minute and recover her memory the next when one of our own servants told me where you had taken your mad artist?"

Betty withdrew her arm, and stopped short. The Earl turned and looked at her. She seemed to have recovered a certain stateliness of manner inherited from her mother, who came from a house which boasted a lineage from days when a Saxon King ruled over Northumbria.

"Grandfather," she said, with a slow precision oddly at variance with her customary vivacity, "you won't mind if a few bottles of wine and some saddles of lamb are wasted on Friday night, will you?"

"What the—what on earth are you driving at now?" was the perplexed answer.

"In any case, we would certainly give a decent spread here on the last day of the Pageant, wouldn't we? And I promise not to mislead you, or Frankie, or anybody, then. Give me a clear twenty-four hours, and I'll come and tell you what I want. I'll not swerve after that, honour bright! And—if I decide to marry Frankie, I'll be a good and faithful wife. I will, indeed."

The two looked at one another in silence. They shared many characteristics, and were extraordinarily alike in their hatred of pretence, while positive deceit was simply impossible in their relations. Knowing quite well that their thoughts were running parallel, they shirked the trying ordeal of expressing them.

"Very well," muttered Lord Mountford, as they walked on again. "You have never yet humbugged me, Betty, and I'll trust you implicitly now. But, have I got this scheme correctly? I take it I am to say nothing till you settle matters for yourself? People must be allowed to assume there is no hitch?"

"Exactly, old darling. Just like the statements to the press given out by an Allied Conference."

"There is one thing I mean to say, however," cried the old gentleman, giving his wayward granddaughter's hand a reassuring squeeze when it sought his arm again. "If Frankie really means to spread himself over the hard surface of the globe he must do so before he marries you."

Betty uttered a curious sound. She hardly contrived to convert a sigh into a giggle.

"Don't worry about Frankie, dearest and best," she said. "If his brother doesn't get over his lung trouble Frankie will die of senile decay in a ducal bed. I can't picture Frankie being bright and clear-headed like you at seventy. Can you?"

"At twenty-five he certainly does not show marked

signs of intellectual longevity," snapped the Earl. . . . "Ah! I knew it. Here are three reporters and a cameraman. They must have counted on Frankie coming down in the park!"

The journalists, of course, were well acquainted with Lord Mountford. One, deputed to act as spokesman, explained that they had met both Miss Sturton and Mr. Aylmer. They gathered from the lady's cheerful signal as she sped past that nothing was wrong, but the artist had described an astounding feat by Lord Francis, who had leaped voluntarily from his aeroplane into a tree, simply because he wished to have a word with Lady Betty, and the tree happened to be in the way of an ordinary descent.

"Of course," smiled the newspaper man, "that was only Mr. Aylmer's picturesque method of saying that the aviator had escaped injury, but we would like to have the exact facts."

The Earl pointed to the avenue.

"You see something shining in the sun over there," he said. "That is Lord Francis, or, rather, his gilded husk. Go and interview him. I can't do him justice. I cannot, really. Personally, I regard Mr. Aylmer's version of the affair as accurate. I believe these performances are known as 'stunts,' a word of American origin. But don't you dare quote me as having said that. Lord Francis must tell his own story. It should be exciting enough."

"Were you alarmed, at all, Lady Betty?" persisted the questioner.

"I?" and the girl was round-eyed with astonishment. "Why should I be? Frankie smashes a plane at least once a week. Most times he takes a toss into mud or turf, but to-day he came down like Phœbus Apollo. He's rather wonderful, don't you think?"

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK

AYLMER had to reassure many anxious people on the road—among others, the Professor and old Barker—as the failure of the gilded aviator to return to the Pageant Field had started a rumour of disaster. It was well that one in a black mood of readiness for the heart-searching process recommended by Pamela should be kept on the beaten track of everyday life by the need of replying civilly to eager questioners. Left to roam unchecked, his wayward thoughts might have fathomed dangerous and uncharted deeps of the subconscious mind. In the conditions, however, he made light of Grosmont's accident to most enquirers, but the claims of greater intimacy demanded the story in detail for the benefit of Hartley-Browne and his nonogenarian crony.

These two had struck up a close friendship. The scientist was amused by the old Yorkshireman's caustic wit, while Barker vowed that he "larned summat" every time the Professor spoke.

"Dang me!" cried the old man, when told that Lord Francis had saved himself by clinging to an elm, "Ah'd sëaner (sooner) be ootside ner inside that söart o' tree. Happen next time it'll cleg (cling) *tiv* him!"

Aylmer was puzzled until the Professor explained that nearly all Mountford coffins were made from elm-wood.

"I think Grosmont has had his last adventure in the air," he said quietly. "Lord Mountford has put his foot down this time. I don't know for certain, because nothing

took place in my presence, but I shall not be surprised to hear that the Earl will not allow Lady Betty to marry him unless he agrees to give up flying."

Hartley-Browne contented himself with a "Hum, ha!" but Barker's eye twinkled.

"Ay, mebbe," he chuckled. "Ah wadn't be surprised if t'young leddy greets (weeps) mair ower t'notion of a weddin' than she wad ower Lord Francis's funeral."

Aylmer changed the subject hurriedly.

"Is Miss Rosalind—Miss Jones—having tea at your place?" he asked.

"Noa. She's gëan off iv a car wi' Mr. Legard, Major Randolph, an' anuther owd bird Ah didn't ken."

Mr. Legard, hitherto known in this chronicle as "Plus Fours," lived many miles away. As Randolph was in armour it was unlikely he would travel far a-field that evening. After a moment's thought, Aylmer hit on the correct solution of Rosalind's motor-ride.

"That girl seems to be popular among the older men," he said. "Even you, Professor, have invited her to dinner to-night, I'm told."

"Ha, hum! Yes. I was—er—put forward as a sort of —er—lay figure by Sir Claude Berkeley, though I—er—admit I did not need much—er—urging."

Aylmer realised at once he was being made aware that the party was actually Sir Claude's, whom he had not met, so there was no chance of his being bidden to the feast.

"All right!" he laughed. "I give you fair warning I mean to come and glower at you from another table. Neither diplomat nor archæologist shall snatch my best girl from me without a struggle—silent, perhaps, but ferocious in its intensity."

"What's that?" demanded Barker, who seldom failed to pick up the salient point of anything he heard. "Is

Miss Jones anuther of 'em? Hoo many best girls hae ye gotten?"

"Not one-third of the number you would credit me with, Mr. Barker," said Aylmer, walking off with ruffled plumes.

"I think," mused the Professor aloud, "it may be helpful if Sir Claude includes our young friend in to-night's dinner."

"Nowt o't'söart!" vowed Barker, himself rather nettled because he had decided to walk back to Mountford with the artist. "Yon lad doesn't knöa what he wants, and it'll dëa him t'wuld o' good te keep hoppin' frae ya (one) leg tiv t'uther."

"You forget he is not altogether responsible for his actions," said Hartley-Browne.

"Wimmen allus cotton on te chaps like him," was the sarcastic reply. "They're nobbut daft creatures at t'best. Ah owt te knöa. Ah've seen plenty of 'em i' ninety-fowr year—ay, an' been a fule ower 'em offen enough."

Then he softened a little, for his old eyes were following the alert figure in the picturesque garments of a long-forgotten age, now striding out of sight around a bend in the road.

"Not as Ah doän't like t' young feller," he added grudgingly. "Dash ma wig, if Ah was t'owd Earl Ah'd give him Betty afore a baker's dozen o' Lord Francises."

"Are you accusing Lord Mountford of—er—contemplating polyandry for his—er—granddaughter?"

"Polly Who? Whëa's that? T'folk do say as how Pamela Stur——"

"Barker, you're a regular gossip. I'm ashamed of you."

"Weel, weel! Mr. Aylmer's nëa sike a bad judge, annyhow. All three are rare good lookers! Sixty—ay, fifty year sen (ago) Ah'd think nowt o' huggin' t'lot."

"Worse and worse! What will St. Peter say to you at the Gate?"

"Saint Pether! Ah reckon he's a tough owd bird like mesen, an' Ah wëan't be fashed if he digs his thumb intiv me ribs an' says, 'Get in quick, ye bald-headed reprobate, afore Ah'm tempted te twig yer black record.' Happen t'ink's a bit faded-like on some o't'early pages."

Aylmer, meanwhile, hoping to escape further chatter, swung into a foot-path which led across the railway to the moorland behind the Castle. The mere physical effort involved was beneficial, since few men can climb a hill and think at the same time. He reached his room at the moment Cellini was washing for dinner.

"Well met, my gallant caballero!" came the greeting. "I was wondering what had become of you, and had begun to fear that Lady Betty had driven you off for good, or ill, which gives you a ready alternative."

Aylmer produced a white shirt and his evening clothes. He sat on the edge of his bed, and began to undress.

"I think the lady was acting for the common good," he said. "At any rate, that is the way things turned out."

"Of course, you were there when Lord Francis emulated Icarus, and melted in the rays of the sun?"

"Yes. The adventure did him no harm. The engagement will now be announced on Friday evening."

"And very proper, too. They are well mated. A girl like that could not be happy unless she had a fool for a husband. Now I, who have never married, have always pursued the exotic. I share the secret longings of a worthy citizen—a nine-in-the-morning City man, and 5.15 home in the evening with a bass-bag from Leadenhall Market—who confessed at the close of a blameless life that he had always pined to live in guilty splendour with a Duchess."

"There are so few Duchesses," grunted Aylmer, struggling with a knot in his jerkin.

"While the 5.15 is packed to the doors at every station five days in the week. Ah, well! At least I may be able to die as Disraeli wished—eating ortolans to the sound of sweet music. But, why the glad rags? Whither away, fair youth?"

"I'm dining at the Black Horse."

"So you have arranged matters with the crowd at the Lodge?"

"No. I shall be alone, unless I pick up Calvert."

"Excellent! Calvert is a splendid fellow. Nature intended him for a successful grocer, but a perverse fate made him a director of pageants, and he delivers the goods like so much tea, blend and quality strictly according to price. I love Calvert. Grocer-like, he mixes the right quantity of soap with his heraldry, some of which would not wash otherwise."

"By the way, do me a favour to-night. Don't sing that silly Telegraph Wire song."

"Now, that's the kind of thing Calvert would never say to the composer. Suppose Lady Betty or the beauteous Rosalind asks for it?"

"Lady Betty will not be there. If Rosalind sends down a request tell her you agree if she and I sing it together."

"You?" And Cellini's eyebrows arched almost to the roots of his hair. "After what you have said about the effect of music on you—isn't that rather foolish?"

"It may be. Honour bright, though. No prompting beforehand."

Again Cellini seemed to be perplexed, but he only said:—

"Very well. And no prior veto by you."

"Naturally. In any case, I shall not have an oppor-

tunity. I don't know this fellow, Berkeley, and he is the real host."

For once in his life Cellini repressed the words on his lips, since he was convinced that a word from him to his old-time friend would procure Aylmer an invitation. Evidently he thought the wiser course was to treat the matter lightly.

"Tell you what," he laughed, "seeing that I pride myself on some knowledge of woman's ways I'll bet you a level quid that either Rosalind or Lady Betty does ask for that particular song."

"Right-o! I'll take you. I have more chance of winning than if I tossed with that remarkable penny of yours. I created quite a sensation at Randolph's place last night by telling him and the others about it."

He was pulling off his high boots, so did not see the scowl which darkened his friend's face for a moment.

"Did you really speak of my trick penny to Major Randolph?" said the other, after a pause, and enunciating with an almost metallic distinctness. Aylmer could hardly fail to catch the change of tone. He looked up in surprise.

"Yes," he said. "Did I do wrong?"

"Perhaps not. But he may regard me as a cheat."

"Nothing of the kind, old fellow. I realised at the moment that the story differed from the penny in that it might have two sides, and there was some discussion of it, which ended in Major Randolph's quite emphatic declaration that you, if not the coin, were good metal. In fact, he described you as a gentleman, and I don't suppose his lexicon contains any word which ranks higher."

Cellini, with great care, chose one out of a dozen precisely similar cigarettes, and lighted it.

"There is no word in my lexicon which describes *you*," he said, at last. "In chemistry, I believe, any element

which blends two or more hostile elements is known as a resolvent, and that is what you are. Opposing forces simply melt before you. It's a Heaven-sent gift. . . . Farewell. We may smoke together in amity later."

Aylmer, aware vaguely that his friend's comment was somewhat more cryptic than usual, did not trouble to search for its meaning. He was yielding again to a disturbed and irresolute mood. Life had suddenly slipped out of the smooth grooves in which it had run during the past few weeks. The mere prospect of two more days of pageantry was irksome. He wondered if Calvert would let him off the next performance. Rosalind might be willing to accompany him for a long ramble over the moors. The mere notion was soothing, and the mental cloud lifted again. He did not even suspect that he was becoming as emotional as a neurotic girl.

He found Calvert seated coatless and collarless, and about to dine off a chop. The director was distinctly pessimistic when informed that no table had been reserved at the hotel.

"Some people may have fed early," he grumbled. "That is our only chance. However, we can always come back to my rooms and get a snack of some sort. And it'll do me good to change. I'll be ready in a jiffy."

It was eight o'clock when they reached the hotel dining-room, after elbowing their way through the crowd which had gathered around the Minstrels.

One glance proved Calvert's prescience. Not only was every table occupied but three groups of people were waiting. It chanced that Rosalind was seated in such a position that she could see all who entered, and she understood exactly what the flurried head-waiter's hopeless gesture meant.

"Oh," she said, with smiling appeal to her host, "there

are Mr. Aylmer and Mr. Calvert being turned out. What a pity! The poor things won't get any dinner."

"Isn't Mr. Calvert the Pageant-master?"

"Yes."

"And who is Mr. Aylmer?"

"The black-and-white artist whose pictures are so much liked."

"Ah. I want to meet him. . . . Hartley-Browne, do you know either of them?"

"Both—quite well," and the Professor was so positive that he neither stammered nor cleared his throat.

"Well, bring 'em here. We can make room for two more. In fact, I had difficulty in reserving this table for only three of us."

Aylmer would have declined the unexpected invitation, but Calvert bustled forward at once. Chairs were brought, and places cleared. Rosalind was sandwiched between the two older men, and Aylmer sat next to Sir Claude.

"This is a perfectly disgraceful intrusion on my part," he said, smilingly. "I expected Rosalind to dine with me to-night, but you have forestalled me, Sir Claude. Then I gave the Professor the strongest sort of hint that I would like to join the party, and he turned me down flat. Yet, here I am. How remarkable! How well engineered! Calvert, of course, is innocent."

Excepting the allusion to the girl by a name which Sir Claude did not recognise, nothing could have been more correct than an utterance of this sort. In fact, Calvert, who was sure that his friend was in "one of his trances," as he put it, choked over a glass of champagne at hearing such a perfectly orthodox explanation of their presence.

"Is 'Rosalind' a *nom de théatre?*" said the diplomat pleasantly, looking from the artist to the lady herself.

"Something of the kind," said Rosalind. "Mr. Aylmer and I met six weeks ago near St. Albans, and he thought that a friend of mine and I might well figure as Rosalind and Celia, because we were on a bicycling tour and meant camping out for the night. He christened himself Julius Cæsar, and, of course, Signor Benvenuto Cellini fitted into the scene quite naturally."

"Ah! You were with Cellini at the time?" said Berkeley to Aylmer.

"I was captive of his bow and fiddle, though I had never seen him before that day. He's one of the best, but he certainly has a magician's power, and magic is a black art, isn't it? Listen, now. Do you know what he is playing?"

"No."

"The concerto which the devil is supposed to have taught Paganini."

Conversation in the packed room had lulled, simply because Cellini was taking a solo, and several people heard what Aylmer said.

A man's voice muttered tensely:—

"By Jove! It's ten years and more since I heard that air. A chap in our Embassy at Constantinople—a fellow named——"

Sir Claude moved suddenly, and a plate, a glass, and some cutlery crashed to the floor. He apologised loudly for his awkwardness, and called for a waiter. During the next minute he was about as popular among the company at large as a wet retriever in a small and crowded boat. Oddly enough, he recognised the man who had spoken of Constantinople, and rose rather noisily to have a word with him. By this time the spell of the music was broken, and people began to talk again.

Though Aylmer knew nothing of Cellini's history, he

did not fail to grasp the underlying motive of all this distraction; he even admired Sir Claude's adroitness in heading off the imminent disclosure. But the impression merely flitted through his brain with the quickness of what is known as a "flash-back" in a motion picture. At the moment he was absorbed in a critical study of Rosalind, and she, well aware of it, seemed to be altogether taken up by a lively chatter with the Professor and Calvert.

That evening she certainly invited close scrutiny. She had more than her wonted share of feminine intuition, and, despite the unlikelihood of needing an evening dress during her strictly professional visit to the North, had brought one with her. It was a simple and modest little frock, an inexpensive confection of cream and heliotrope muslin, but the radiant beauty of her face, with its crown of luxuriant golden-brown hair, lent a charm to the gown not to be conferred by any modiste in Paris or London. Quite naturally, she imagined that Aylmer's artistic eye was, at least, drawn by her appearance. In reality, he was seeing a new Rosalind, and the discovery was troubling him She was mixing in society with the ease of one born in the purple. Her self-possession was rather stupefying. He would hardly have known her as the same girl who melted to tears in the garden at Wheathampstead, or whose sympathy was given so graciously that very morning after he had rebuffed her shy advances. How could she have changed so greatly within a few hours? He was quite certain that Sir Claude Berkeley would not have received so glib an answer to the question about her name had she been called on to explain the point after breakfast that very day. Had she been schooling herself to act a part? And, why? And how well she kept the table going! Even that old fossil, Hartley-Browne, was basking in her smiles, while Calvert was

firing off his most carefully prepared impromptus for her benefit.

"Pageants and the new germ treatment sprang into life together," he was saying. "Each fails if not taken in large doses. That is why the Mountford affair is a colossal success. It covers so much ground historically, and offers such a bewildering sequence of beautiful pictures, that the onlooker cannot criticise. Before he has digested the Plantagenets he is swallowing Tudors. Queen Elizabeth crosses the stage in royal progress only to make way for Cromwell and his Ironsides."

"I wonder what effect these things have on the townspeople," said Sir Claude. "Do the educative influences remain?"

"I think I ought to reply," broke in Rosalind. "You men have had the benefit of early training, and have seen so much of the world. Now, I am a girl, who, beyond going to a board school and picking up a little music, have learnt nothing, absolutely nothing, of the wonders of my own land, yet one brief afternoon in the Pageant Field has not only taught me a great deal but fired me with ambition to read. . . . But, you have forgotten one thing, Mr. Calvert. I was brought here by Mr. Aylmer's sketches."

"And I," said Sir Claude.

"Aylmer would sooner hear that from you than from me, Rosalind—if I may call you 'Rosalind,' " cried Calvert.

"Excellent, my dear Napoleon," laughed Aylmer. "Still, you're not going to get off so easily. I want to show Rosalind our moors to-morrow, so am now petitioning for a day off. Further, I hope you will make sure she gets a seat for Friday's Tournament."

"Sir Claude," said Calvert, refilling his glass absent-

mindedly. "You, I understand, are in the diplomatic service. May I give you a bit of friendly advice? Go to Mesopotamia, and persuade the Arabs to love the Persians. Take the Athens Embassy, and pacify the Balkans. But, for the love of Mike, never agree to run a Pageant! However, friend Aylmer, your prayer is granted."

"Everybody here has been so kind that I fear I shall go back to my shop rather dissatisfied with life," sighed the girl, and her expressive features clouded for an instant.

Possibly the minx hoped that Aylmer would not be pleased by this general classification of the people who were making smooth her path in Mountford, but, if he felt the thrust, he gave no sign.

"Don't take Calvert and his pageanteers too seriously," he said. "He is not giving us history but *tableaux vivants*."

"For all that," put in the Professor, "I—er—agree with Miss Rosalind's estimate of the—er—educational value of these performances. Actual historical truth is—er—hidden from us, fortunately so, perhaps, since it might—er—only show us 'old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles of long ago.' "

Some nerve took alarm, and tingled a warning in Aylmer's brain, but he disregarded it.

"I am rather given to a fanciful reconstructing of the past," he said, "and I admit readily that I find no pleasure in it. Why do we so seldom laugh in our dreams?"

"Or cry, for that matter," said Calvert.

"Ha, hum! I have a nebulous theory that when in—er—a subconscious state we are—er—spectators rather than actors," pronounced Hartley-Browne.

"Sometimes I feel terribly frightened—in a dream," said Rosalind.

"The emotion of fear is the one exception which—er—

helps to prove my general rule. Fear is primal, instinctive. It—er—dominates our lives. Men and animals are alike in that respect. Humanity will never rid itself of fear, waking or sleeping."

"I certainly felt it to-day," said Calvert. "When that gallant but perverse youth, Lord Francis Grosmont, was reported to have crashed in the Lodge Park, I shivered in my shoes for the fate of Friday's Tournament."

"By the way, Mr. Aylmer, it is a queer coincidence that the name of the knight who jousts with Lord Francis in the final bout is the same as yours," exclaimed Sir Claude.

"Yes," cried Aylmer cheerfully, "and the sad part of it is that Calvert has blundered there, because when two men raced at each other on this very ground six hundred years ago for the guerdon of a lady's hand, I, Sir Richard Aylmer, flung to earth that false knight, Sir Guilbert de Lancy, and forced him to admit, with the point of my sword at his teeth, that he was betrothed to a stout Venus who lived in the neighbouring Castle of Armathwaite."

"Please, can't we talk of something else?" complained Rosalind, anxious now to head off the conversational hare she had started, for she had just caught a lambent gleam in Aylmer's eyes. "Do listen! Mr. Mannering is going to sing the 'Salve dinora.' Mr. Cellini is now playing the prelude."

Mannering ran through the famous aria quite creditably, more to his own surprise than to that of the audience, none suspecting that his highest musical flights before he fell in with Cellini had been sentimental ballads in which "moon" rhymed with "coon" and "Mammy" with "Sammy." During the applause at the end Aylmer confided to Sir Claude that the tenor of the Minstrels described himself quite accurately nowadays as "a converted pierrot."

Berkeley smiled, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Was it altogether by chance," he said, in an undertone, "that you used the name de Lancy just now?"

"No. I have reason to believe I was relating a literal fact."

"Are you acquainted with anyone of the name now living?"

"Not so well as you, I imagine."

The eyes of the two met, but more could not be said at the moment, as the hotel porter brought a note to Aylmer. It read:—

Ave, Cæsar! The Lady Betty sends a request for your song. She and her friends are without, seated grandly in automobiles. If happy where you are, I'll let you off the rendition, but not the bet. Thine, B. C.

Aylmer seemed to weigh the matter during a few seconds. Then he explained lightly that he felt in honour bound to carry out the terms of his bond, but made no allusion to his own pact that Rosalind should share in the performance. He felt that the unforeseen presence of the other woman negatived the suggestion utterly. He rose, and went out. Rosalind, apprehensive of some evil in the air which she could not describe in words, asked if she and the others might not stand on the balcony while Aylmer sang. It chanced that some people who had been dining there went away, assuming probably, that the concert was nearly finished, so the group of four found room to lean on the balustrade. Space was limited to the area of the porch beneath, and, as speakers often held forth from the spot in periods of political excitement, a lamp overhead revealed the occupants to the crowd.

Lady Betty had heard by this time of Professor Hartley-Browne's "little flutter," as Lord Francis described

the entertaining of Rosalind, and had been told, too, that Aylmer and Calvert were in the party. When, greatly to her surprise, Cellini announced that the song would be given by its writer, accompanied by the composer, and she saw Aylmer coming to join the musicians, her quick wit discerned the very opportunity she had sought.

"I want to have a word with that girl up there, Frankie," she said to her *fiancé*. "Hop inside with me, and keep the men engaged. I sha'n't stay more than a couple of minutes."

Not even Lord Mountford, observing events from another car, could regard this action as a breach of the truce agreed on earlier, but Pamela Sturton scented mischief, and her involuntary exclamation astonished the Lancer captain at her elbow.

"What's up?" he enquired solicitously.

"I poked my tongue into a hollow tooth, and it stung like a viper," she explained.

"Can I get you an extra wrap, or something?"

"Dear man, I'm stifled! Who ever heard of such weather in Yorkshire in August?"

The Lancer was puzzled, but, as he said in the mess at York later:—"A chap with an iron hand turned up, an' put all the girls on the blink with his fiddling. I never heard anything like the way he played; it turned nearly every woman crazy, especially the young 'uns."

Aylmer had begun before Lady Betty and her escort reached the balcony, so Lord Francis had little to do, and did it well, by holding his tongue and listening to the music. His companion caught Rosalind's arm, drawing her aside in a friendly if compelling way.

"Sorry to butt in," she said, speaking almost in a whisper, "but I've been longing to meet you again, so am seizing this chance. You are Rosalind, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Rosalind's manner was composed. She felt instantly that she was face to face with a crisis in her life, and a great courage welled up in her breast.

"I am Betty Luttrell. You know of me, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"If you talk like that I shall believe you are vexed, which will be good for neither of us. May I discuss a matter which is vital to my happiness, and, possibly, to yours?"

"Please don't discuss Mr. Richard Aylmer—here."

The girl's frigidity was calculated to silence anyone but Lady Betty, who, however, was so definitely committed to a fixed purpose that she even gave no heed to an extraordinary instance of feminine telepathy.

"But I must!" she said, and her voice shook under the strain imposed by the barrier of convention, since the open balcony of the Black Horse Hotel provided no fit setting for the higher drama, no matter how restrained in method. "Is he going to marry you?"

"What right have you to ask?"

"What right have you to refuse an answer? Surely you can say 'Yes' or 'No'!"

"I think he will never marry anyone."

"Has he told *you* that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This morning."

"He must be almost a great lover. He said the same thing to me this afternoon."

"You sought the information, I expect. I did not."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, don't let us quarrel like a cook and a housemaid about the under-footman! Does Mr. Aylmer really know his own mind?"

"Better, perhaps, than either of us knows hers."

"I don't care what you think of me, but I do implore you to stop fencing and speak plainly. Why did you come to Mountford? You had some hidden motive? What was it?"

"Why cannot you and your friend leave poor Mr. Aylmer alone? You give him no peace. He didn't want to go with you to the Lodge to-day. As for Miss Sturton, she is watching us now, hoping, I suppose, that if we quarrel her chance will come. But Mr. Aylmer will never marry any of us—never. He is far too honourable."

"Honourable! What do you mean?"

"He does truly believe his mind is affected, and he will not ask, he won't even permit, any woman to share his burden. . . . Listen! He is telling us of his resolve now."

So rapid were thrust and parry between the two that the singer had only reached the second verse of his song. And he had seen them. Of that there could be no manner of doubt. Their ears, tuned to an intensity little dreamed of by others who may have wondered what these two pretty girls were debating so eagerly, caught the true intent of the words:—

> My wandering feet led me down the Road;
> For ever the Wire sang over-head;
> And at last I learnt how to bear the load
> Which each man carries until he's dead.

"If you realised my intolerable position you'd be more sympathetic," broke in Lady Betty tensely. "I'm practically engaged to Frankie Grosmont, yet I'd throw him over now at the eleventh hour, if that other man took me in his arms. And don't imagine there would be any family trouble, or that sort of thing. My grandfather likes Mr.

Aylmer, and, in any event, will not oppose my fixed resolve. But I've been brought up to play the game. If you have a prior claim I'll back out now—this very instant."

"I have no prior claim—no sort of claim."

"Ah!" The young patrician was so overwrought that she literally gasped for breath.

"But let us at least be candid with one another," said Rosalind, forcing acrid words from some secret fount of bitterness she did not know she possessed. "Even though we both love the same man we should not be blind to his desires. The very notion of marriage affrights him. He is so constituted that if he loved a woman I believe he would kill himself rather than let her run the risk of being wed to a madman."

Lady Betty recoiled somewhat. She almost wondered what manner of woman this was who could be so sweet-voiced yet so brutally outspoken.

"I—I'm sure he exaggerates the danger of a collapse of that sort," she faltered.

"Do you seek proof? There is a great London surgeon staying in the district, Sir James Macpherson, who attended Mr. Aylmer in France, and has kept track of him for nearly three years. Ask his opinion."

"Would that be quite—fair?"

"Better find out the truth now. Would you marry Mr. Aylmer if this scientist assured you his mind must give way, sooner or later?"

"No. Honestly, I would not."

"Then you don't love him. You are not worthy of him. You may be a titled lady, yet you are not a fit mate for such a man."

Lady Betty's cheeks grew scarlet.

"I did not expect to be trapped by a cross-examining lawyer," she protested.

"I intended no trap. I have merely shown you that it is your own happiness, not his, you are engrossed with."

"That, at least, is unjust. And, please, control yourself. Why proclaim our troubles to the wide world?"

Rosalind, all ablaze with passion though she was, felt that the reproof was merited. She forced a wintry smile worthy of Medea in a moment of tragic jest.

"I think I am right," she said, more calmly, "though Heaven knows it is not for me to judge you. Search your own heart, Lady Betty! It will not deceive you."

A burst of applause drowned the concluding chorus of the song. Rosalind turned to Hartley-Browne.

"Professor," she cried gaily, "I am convinced that if Mr. Aylmer had met you before he wrote his song the chorus would have been 'Ha, hum,' instead of 'Hum, hum, fiddle and drum."

Lady Betty gave her rival a swift glance of sheer astonishment. Then she caught Lord Francis Grosmont's shoulder.

"Come along, old thing!" she said. "Grandad will be grumpy if he doesn't have a rubber before going to bye-bye."

"One moment, Lady Betty!" broke in Calvert. "Our young friend here," and he indicated Rosalind with a sidelong nod, "is writing something about the Tournament, but arrived in Mountford so late that I can hardly promise her a place on the stands. Will you let me add her to your train as one of the Maids of Honour?"

Lady Betty laughed loudly.

"Delighted!" she gurgled.

"How perfectly sweet of both of you!" cooed Rosalind.

CHAPTER XVII

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

Lady Betty and her cavalier met Aylmer on the staircase. Disregarding an enthusiastic recall, the singer hurried from the Minstrels' stand in the centre of the small market-place. He did not even glance at the array of cars from the Lodge drawn up on one side of the square. He was irritated at himself as well as at the rest of the world. Once more had music affected him adversely, which was absurd, since he was in good voice, and there was nothing derogatory in taking a solo thus publicly among so many people who knew him. Again, he was annoyed by Lady Betty's vagaries. Her beauty and her undoubted charm were almost outweighed by her arrogance. And now it would seem, even demure little Rosalind could not come to Mountford without being made to dance to any tune of Lady Betty's choosing. In a word, it would have been better for everyone concerned if the young couple from the Lodge had contrived to return to their car while Aylmer was still warbling.

But the moon, just verging on the full, was peeping over the crest of the moorland, and had already paled the yellow gleams of Mountford's old-fashioned street lamps. In consequence any self-respecting astrologer would have shuddered at the influence this brilliant orb could not fail to exercise on the artist-poet-airman's highly-strung if not altogether unbalanced temperament.

For once in a while, Betty felt that sufficient for the day had been the excitement thereof, and her tone was

agreeably conventional as she greeted the man for whose love she had been struggling so fiercely, in her own peculiar way, hardly a minute earlier.

"I adore that song of yours, Mr. Aylmer," she said gaily, "but I hadn't the ghost of a notion that we would have the pleasure of hearing you sing it."

"Were you listening?" he enquired, throwing such cold disbelief into the question that she flushed. Still, she seemed to pay no heed.

"Why, of course," she said. "Why should I have troubled to ask for it otherwise?"

"I am not skilled in interpreting women's motives, Lady Betty, but, in this instance, the evidence of my eyes contradicts your words."

"Here, I say! What's up?" broke in Lord Francis hotly.

"Please don't take a hand, Frankie," cried the girl, thoroughly startled now. "Mr. Aylmer is angry with me about something. Let's find out what it is."

"What were you and Rosalind discussing so strenuously during my absence?" said Aylmer, his gorge rising at the thought that she, the imperious assailant, had put him promptly on the defensive, yet, in the presence of her pledged husband, he yielded so far as to allow her to state her own case.

But she only indulged in a peal of laughter, which might have been forced but sounded natural enough, while Grosmont, always ready to fly into a temper when Aylmer was near, displayed finer strategy than he guessed at by interfering again.

"Dash it all, don't raise a fuss about nothing!" he blustered. "Lady Betty was arranging to take Miss What's-her-name as a Maid of Honour on Friday, so that she can see the Tournament from the best point of view."

Aylmer did then look at him for the first time that night.

"Are you, by any chance, telling the truth?" he demanded, speaking with an icy distinctness which lent a calculated insolence to a wholly unmerited insult, since Lord Francis literally believed what he had said. Betty, knowing better, acted quite unscrupulously.

"Frankie!" she faltered, with a shrinking fear not wholly assumed, for she had caught a peculiarly unnerving glint in Aylmer's eyes, "Frankie, dear! Do come along. . . . No, not another word! I insist!"

Seizing Grosmont's arm, she literally forced him down the few remaining steps of the stairs.

Naturally, Pamela Sturton was waiting to stick a metaphorical pin into her.

"When you have done gadding about, old thing, may we go home?" came the greeting.

"I was only waiting to persuade Mr. Aylmer into giving us another song, but he seemed rather anxious to make a speech, so I just tore myself away, darling. . . . Is everybody on parade? Do you care to hear the rest of the programme, Lady Castleton? . . . Well, grandad, if you lead, we'll follow."

"Did you find out from Hartley-Browne what time he wants a car?" said Lord Mountford unexpectedly.

"No. Sorry. I never thought of that."

"Will you go and ask him, Frankie?"

Lady Betty's grip tightened on Grosmont's arm; Nemesis was still pursuing her.

"Won't you send the chauffeur?" she suggested. "Then there can be no possible misunderstanding. You see, I shall not be surprised if the whole party up there goes to the Castle with Mr. Cellini and his troupe."

The Earl agreed at once. He himself would gladly

have joined the Professor and the others, but that renegade action was practically impossible in the circumstances. It chanced, too, that the girl's desperate anxiety to prevent further quarrelling between the two young men had induced, for the moment, some quality of divination in her troubled brain, as the chauffeur reported, on his return, that he was to call at Montfort at 11.30.

"The old dog!" chuckled Lord Mountford. "I didn't think he had it in him!"

Meanwhile, Lord Francis Grosmont's not very active mind was working, and, as is usual in such cases, was arriving at certain quite definite conclusions. It was awfully ripping, and that sort of thing, to have Betty clinging to him with an affectionate confidence she had never shown before, but even this thrilling fact did not dissipate the memory of the artist-fellow's dashed impertinence.

"Tell you what," he said, when the cars were speeding through the outskirts of the town, "that chap, Aylmer, is gettin' a bit above himself. He's a crank, of course, but even cranks have to be ticked off if they don't behave."

Betty changed a sigh into a throaty laugh.

"Don't you go and be silly, too, Frankie," she said. "Do you want to spoil the absolutely wonderful time before us for the next two days? After Friday night we shall be an old and staid engaged pair. Now, promise, dearest, not even a teeny-weeny snap at Mr. Aylmer when you meet him to-morrow."

Their faces were very near. The infatuated wooer felt the siren's breath on his cheek, and was tinglingly awake to the fragrance of her hair. She had called him "dearest," too!

"All right!" he murmured. "You know, darling, your slightest wish is a law to me."

Betty did then sigh contentedly, as the day's worries seemed really to have ended. She little suspected that this devoted youth was making a mental reservation. If he was forbidden to tackle Aylmer on Thursday he'd jolly well have it out with him on Friday. The blighter might have won a good record in the war, but it was a recognised truism in army circles that poets were nervous rotters, who collapsed individually like a paper bag full of air when an ordinary johnnie handed out a hard jab, whether verbally or physically. They made a big noise, and that was all.

Rosalind pleaded excessive fatigue as well as the absolute need of a long night's sleep if she were to walk miles through the heather next day, so her numerous escort left her at the door of the Barkers' cottage. Cellini was with them, he and Berkeley having met with the smiling formality of recent acquaintance. Aylmer promised to arrive punctually at nine for breakfast, and the girl soon found herself in the secure haven of her bedroom. She sat there a long time without a light, looking out at the moonlit sky, and drilling herself sternly into a sensible frame of mind. She succeeded so well that it was long after midnight before she cried herself to sleep, while two other young ladies were indulging in precisely the same nerve treatment in their respective rooms at the Lodge.

Happily for the cause of these feminine tempests, he, the said excuse, was compelled by the exigencies of the hour to behave and talk sanely. Even when the Professor and Sir Claude had gone, Cellini would not let him saunter out alone into the courtyard, but accompanied him, and kept up a lively chatter until Aylmer himself cried aloud for rest. Not once was his heated imagination free to wander in the realms of make-believe. Aylmer spoke of

the beauty and romance of mediæval life, but Cellini scoffed at these conceits.

"The whole pretty story is a tissue of nonsense," he declared roundly. "This old place, so majestic in decay, was nothing more nor less than an evil-smelling and prison-like pest-house in its days of activity. There was neither good air, nor warmth, nor the commonest comfort to be had. The merest decencies of existence could not be observed. Both knights and men-at-arms were illiterate ruffians, mostly unkempt, too, since they seldom washed any part of their bodies except the tips of their fingers, and those only when someone thrust water in front of them. They ate and drank like hogs, and their resplendent armour was generally covered with rust unless it was kept well greased with oil of a most villainous odour. Why, old Sergeant Jackson and his good wife, snugly entrenched in the remains of the guard-room, are better housed, better fed, and infinitely better clothed than the first cut-throat de Montfort who scourged some wretched Saxon churls into building his Castle, or any of his successors—within these walls, at any rate."

Aylmer did not try to bear up against this tornado; indeed, he was fully alive to its kindly intent.

"I have often suspected something of the sort," he said, smiling cheerfully. "Now, at the end of an imperfect day, I am almost convinced you are right."

"If I were you," went on Cellini, "I'd drop this Pageant business altogether. You've done the show any amount of good, while it has reciprocated by making you famous. Better than that, it has given you a profession. For once in a while let the jester speak words of wisdom. Take your Rosalind to London on Friday, speed her on her way to Paris, and then visit a few art editors. Of course, not one among them knows good work when he sees it, be-

cause the unhappy wights are bemused by the avalanches of poor stuff which every post dumps on their desks. But you're all right. You've arrived. They'll gobble up anything you supply till a fickle public wearies of you. Meanwhile, you'll learn how to draw!"

"Will you oblige me by chastening Lady Betty with a few home truths like that?"

"Not I. Every woman knows more about humbug than I can teach her. I'm quite certain we've never had the true version of what happened in the Garden of Eden. Eve could talk—has never ceased doing so—but the wretched snake could only hiss."

"Adam told a plain tale."

"Did he? I doubt it. Why should his thick head differ from any other man's? 'The woman tempted me, and I did eat.' What else have we been doing ever since, with a never-failing zest for the banquet, too? We're all alike—painter, poet, musican and ploughman—we strut about like cocks in a farm-yard, crowing loudly of our superiority to the weaker sex, and never see the mocking smile on the favoured fair one's lips. That is why Leonardo da Vinci has been stone dead for centuries, while his Mona Lisa still leers brazenly at all the world."

"I wish you had been living in Mountford during the past month," laughed Aylmer. "You'd have talked me to sleep every night."

"Well, well! Is that my reward? Off to bed, then, and may you dream of roast geese, which was Heine's notion of Paradise!"

Cellini watched his friend covertly until he was tucked up in the sheets, and breathing too regularly to be shamming.

"If I didn't like you so well, Richard Aylmer," he communed, "I certainly would not plague my wits concerning

you. 'To be or not to be—that is the question.' Whether 'tis better you should crack up once and for all, and take your chance of ultimate recovery, or carry on in your present lovable and feckless fashion, I don't know, and I don't believe the combined Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons could enlighten me. However, to-morrow as ever is, I'll unearth that canny old Scotch doctor who came here to-day, and learn what he predicts, or fears. He may be persuaded to growl a diagnosis if convinced of my good faith."

Aylmer had the rare physiological quality of sinking into healthy slumber after an orgy of cerebral excitement. Many times that day had his spiritual vision peered into an abyss which threatened the utter extinction of his normal mind, yet the hap of a moment had as often drawn him back from the very edge of the pit. If he made any sort of a struggle to save his reason it had been an unconscious effort on each occasion. But the reservoir of psychic vitality was falling dangerously low, and it was, indeed, well for him that Cellini's shrewd eyes had discerned his unsettled state, and that such a genial cynic was at hand to banish the fit of abstraction which must otherwise have overwhelmed him in the ruined courts of Montfort at midnight. Those grass-grown halls were now wondrous etchings in black and silver. The dullest brain could not have failed to people their gaunt solitudes with spectres; Aylmer's super-heated imagination might have clothed each shadow with reality, and endowed every dim vista with a wealth of colour and vivid movement—those entrancing but deadly hallucinations of a mind diseased.

Cellini, asked by Lord Mountford not so long ago what, in his opinion, would have been the outcome if Aylmer had not been safeguarded, so to speak, that night, was coldly sarcastic.

"If no man could prophesy what did happen later," he said, "where is the necromancer who can tell us what might have happened then? There is no such accomplished liar on earth!"

The true record of the closing days of the Mountford Pageant may live many a year in local memory, but it never reached the press. Even so, the story will vary on every lip.

The one point on which all narrators should agree is the marvel of the weather. Sunlit days and moonlit nights formed a steady, jogtrot sequence seldom noted in England. Fruit and crops were ripening weeks before their customary time. The aftermath on the meadows was brown, not green. The turf of the Pageant field itself had become so hard and smooth from the trampling of thousands of feet that it needed to be watered thoroughly each morning if horses carrying fair dames and glittering knights might curvet without slipping or gallop with safety.

Rosalind and Aylmer, climbing the hill facing the Castle next morning, and thus winning clear of the town very quickly, were the last two people breathing who were likely to cavil at the British climate because the sun's rays were fierce. Mrs. Barker had given them an excellent breakfast of Yorkshire ham and eggs, home-made bread, and butter and jam which had not travelled many yards from their place of origin to the spotless tablecloth. She also provided sandwiches of roast beef, hard-boiled eggs, and cheese, which she crammed into a cartridge-bag made by a local saddler fifty years ago.

"An' still as good as ivver," she declared. "Ye can't buy tough leather an' stoot canvas noo-a-days."

Neither young man nor young woman showed the slightest trace of yesterday's strenuous life. Each was

delighted with the other's company, and looked forward to many hours of contented wandering across the moors.

"Where are we going?" Rosalind could not help inquiring as they reached the brow of the hill; Aylmer pointed to the purple line of the horizon.

"Beyond!" he said simply. The word sufficed; it set joy-bells ringing in the girl's heart.

They halted to take breath, for they had pressed on as though afraid of being called back by some messenger of the irate gods. They saw Cellini and his singers watching them from the Castle gate, so Rosalind waved a handkerchief.

"You've done that many a time in the past," said Aylmer. "This is the old road from the Border to Montfort. It forded the river where the bridge stands now, and the Castle folk used to gather on the causeway to bid their friends a last farewell before the heather swallowed them bodily."

He was lighting his pipe, and spoke so carelessly that the exact sense of the words did not dawn on his hearer at once. She said nothing until their faces were set once more toward the north—and freedom, at least for a day.

Then, with a wistful tenderness in her eyes which Aylmer did not see, she put forth a timid appeal.

"Cæsar," she said, "just for a little while let us forget Montfort and its memories. I don't even want to think of modern Mountford, or any of the people in it. May I tell you what a dear Miss Smithers is, and what Celia says in a letter which came by the morning's post? And, after that, talk to me of your school-days, and your mother. And, if you can possibly remember a few verses of your own poetry, I should love to hear them."

"You are not Rosalind, but Delilah, I fear," he laughed. "Still, I consent to be bound, on one condition. Is it true

that Lady Betty has invited you to join the train of her Maids of Honour to-morrow?"

The question was not wholly unexpected. Rosalind had foreseen that he could hardly fail to seek some explanation of Lady Betty's visit to the hotel balcony. But its form puzzled her, since she knew nothing of the meeting on the stairs.

"Yes," she said. "It is quite true. That is to say, Mr. Calvert suggested it, and she agreed at once."

"Ah! Then I owe an apology to Lord Francis Grosmont."

"Whatever for?"

"He was my informant, and I thought he was talking through his hat—as usual."

Rosalind scented trouble if she probed farther into this trivial dispute, no matter how it had originated. Yet it would be folly to avoid the topic too pointedly.

"I have seen little of him," she said, "but people hereabouts seem to regard him as feather-brained. For all that, he appears to be really devoted to Lady Betty. If she is wise, and treats him well, he will make her an admirable husband."

"She herself is coming round to that view," agreed Aylmer.

There is no love without sacrifice. Rosalind was aching to discover the hidden meaning of these fair-sounding words, but repressed the longing, because that way lay danger. Luckily, she was alarmed by the sudden rising of a pack of grouse, which had been feeding among the short heather by the roadside. Their startled chuckling and noisy flight were new experiences to one who had never before seen the feathered lords of the moorland in their own domain. Aylmer showed her a line of butts below the nearest crest, and explained how the birds were

driven over the guns. From that moment Rosalind was oblivious of everything save the blue sky, the peaty air which still held the fresh tang of the morning, the strips of turf carpet bordering the rough track, the changing lights on the gorse and ling, the glorious panorama of hills and valleys, with distant glimpses of black woods of fir and the greenery of moor-edge farms.

After walking three miles they sat by the side of a mountain stream; Aylmer produced a sketch block and a box of colours, and Rosalind watched him, as one in a happy trance, transfer to paper some of the vivid tints revealed by the miniature torrent in its gambols and swirls down a boulder-strewn channel. Then, following the water-course, they came to a hill which bore on its summit an ancient cross, put there by some kind-hearted person ages ago as a land-mark and guide for wintry days when the bleak expanse was all one coverlet of snow. Delving into a steep ravine, they soon found themselves in a secluded vale where pious hands had erected a famous twelfth century church, still in use, and carefully preserved, with quaint inscriptions on its weather-worn tombstones, and cross-legged effigies of Crusaders in its crypt.

Here they made a discovery which might have had serious consequences. One monument, of the fifteenth century, as stated on a renovated brass, was "sacred to the memory of Sir Richard Aylmer, knight, of Thorneythwaite, and his wife, the Lady Elisabeth, daughter of the Sieur de Montfort."

But Aylmer, fortunately, only chortled with glee.

"That fat Calvert," he cried, "has builded better than he knew. Here is proof positive of an ancestor of mine having lived in these parts long before Mountford got its mongrel name. What a stone out of the brook to sling at the swollen head of the Marchioness of Castleton,

whose title, I believe, is a Victorian creation! Oh, I must hear more of this. I wonder what quality of parson resides in these parts? A man of taste, I should imagine, judging by his well-kept church and trim church-yard. That old house among the apple-trees must be the vicarage. Let's call!"

And call they did, to be received most hospitably by an elderly clergyman who seemed to rather enjoy being buried alive among flowers and books in this remote place. He offered them luncheon, but they proved the necessity of consuming a huge stock of sandwiches, so he compromised by supplying tea. Of the six-hundred-years-dead Sir Richard Aylmer he only knew that the warrior had taken his bride to Somerset, but had fallen during a Scots foray while visiting the de Montforts, and was buried in Yorkshire for lack of suitable transport to the far-away West Country.

Whereupon Aylmer smote his thigh, and vowed roundly he would have given a hundred pounds to have had the joy of telling his father that most notable fact.

"Some family tombs in an old church near Taunton were falling into decay," he explained, "and my dad obtained a faculty, or something of the sort, to have them repaired. The tomb of this very Sir Richard Aylmer, when opened, was empty. Now I know why. Odd, isn't it, that I had no recollection—no conscious recollection, that is—of the de Montfort marriage till this moment."

Rosalind quaked a little then, but the object of her solicitude was filling his pipe, and, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable, asking his host to occupy a chair in the garden at an angle which revealed the venerable lynch-gate and the heavy Norman tower of the church. Straightway he made an admirable drawing of the old gentleman, with the mediæval accessories deftly suggested

in the background, and the said drawing now hangs on the best lighted wall of the vicarage library.

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Sir James MacPherson did not attend the Pageant that day, so Cellini's quest failed in that respect. But he met Professor Hartley-Browne, who, if not so well posted in human anatomy and the distribution of nerve centres as the experienced surgeon, could speak with accuracy and completeness of the phenomenal psychic traits revealed by Aylmer during his residence in the Castle.

"There is no accounting by ordinary means for some of the things he has said," explained the Professor gravely. "I may claim to be—er—fairly conversant with nearly every written word about the ancient buildings of the North Riding, and, in no book I have ever heard of is there one-twentieth part of the—er—amazing personal familiarity with the history of Montfort and its most famous Norman occupant which Aylmer displays. Yes —'amazing' is the only word. It has been my—er—life's work to reconstruct Roman camps, old fortresses, ruined shrines, and the like, but I—er—admit candidly that I sit at Aylmer's feet, and listen when he talks of this town and Castle in the reign of Henry the Sixth."

Cellini was not flippant that day. For some reason which he could not even begin to define, he longed for the close of the Mountford Week and Aylmer's resultant departure for other scenes.

"All this is interesting and remarkable," he commented gloomily, "but I suppose you agree with me, Professor, the exercise of such powers of retrospection—shall we call it?—cannot fail but be harmful to our friend?"

"Undoubtedly, if—er—pushed to extremes. Yet Aylmer is eminently sane. He has won the distinction which —er—real artistic genius is seldom denied. He is

liked by everyone. Indeed, among—er—certain sections of our mixed community he is—er—most popular."

"Yes," Cellini could not help growling then. "One sees that in many pairs of eyes."

"By the way," said Hartley-Browne, seeming to muse aloud rather than encourage gossip, "did—er—anything in particular happen last night after he had sung?"

"Do you mean was he delayed in rejoining your party?"

"Yes."

"I think so. He must have met Betty Luttrell and Frankie Grosmont on the stairs."

The Professor's face remained unmoved, but his quite alert ears caught a new note in the musician's voice. This was not the leader of a troupe of singers speaking, but a man dealing with his own social equals. Just for once, anxiety for a friend had betrayed the mountebank fiddler.

"Then you will be glad to hear that it was definitely decided this morning that Lord Mountford announces the engagement to-morrow night," he said.

"Isn't that rather old news?"

"Ha, hum! Yes, in a sense. This is—er—to-day's official communiqué. I—er—imagine it is the outcome of last night's meeting between Lady Betty and Mr. Aylmer, who were—er—somewhat annoyed with each other."

"Good! I'll stage a small private festivity as a sedative. I wish you could join us, Professor; that is out of the question, of course?"

"Absolutely. But—er—you ought to know, and then forget, that a minor difficulty has arisen. Lord Mountford wants to invite Aylmer to the dinner, and secure your services later in the evening, but the Marchioness of Castleton favours a quieter gathering. The matter may be arranged. Will you—er—communicate with the Earl before accepting any other engagement?"

"I can say quite definitely now that I shall not be free

to-morrow, and, if Aylmer is persuadable, he certainly will not attend. Why the devil should he?"

"His presence might allay certain unfounded rumours."

"And start others only too well founded. Let me repay one confidence with another. By idle chance this morning I heard through one of the servants at the Lodge, of that ass, Grosmont, having told a young fool of his own kidney in the billiard-room late last night that he intended to punch Aylmer's head before the week is out. Of course, he can't do it, but he may try—just to celebrate his *fiançailles*. Please get Lord Mountford to leave art and music to their own devices—for this week, at any rate."

Then two men exchanged a look of utmost frankness.

"Hum, ha!" said the Professor.

"Exactly!" said Cellini.

"I—er—am glad we met."

"Professor, if you and I were given plenary powers we would be benevolent autocrats."

"Has Aylmer taken the charming little Rosalind for that promised tramp across the moors?"

"Yes, thank goodness; which disposes of the morning and the evening of the third day."

"Yet I think everything will come right in the end."

"Professor, that is the sort of airy opinion one looks for in the peaceful seclusion of the University quadrangle. It is superbly accurate in the matter of the Third Punic War, but it might be wrong with regard to the Tournament and the ultimate choice of the Queen of Beauty."

And, indeed, did these well-meaning gentlemen but know it, the fate of the Tournament was the butt of circumstances at that very moment. Lady Betty had missed Aylmer from the Pageant Field. It might be thought that his presence or absence on that particular afternoon was of slight import to her. But a woman does not reason in that detached way. For one thing, Pamela Sturton had

contrived to stick another pin into her. Major Randolph, it appeared, little dreaming of treading on any fair lady's toes, had spoken appreciatively of Rosalind.

"I had no idea," he said, while telling of the tea-party, "that such a nice-mannered and well-educated girl could be found in a London shop. Perhaps I've put that awkwardly. What I mean is her total absence of pretence, and that sort of thing. She can really speak French. She has a genuine knowledge of the best music. And, best of all, she is contented with her lot, which is more than I can say of a good many girls in county society."

For Betty's benefit Pamela polished a few facets on the uncut diamond of the Major's tribute—an unkind trick, of course, but nerves were on edge just then in the exclusive circle at the Lodge. Again, Lady Betty, beginning to suspect that she had acted foolishly, not once but several times, during the past few days, wanted to meet both Aylmer and Rosalind on the wholly different terms which her definite betrothal to Lord Francis Grosmont would warrant. Assuredly, while in this mood, she might be trusted to interpret correctly their temporary disappearance from Mountford.

She sought Calvert, on whose shoulders all troubles fell.

"Why isn't that girl here to-day?" she demanded, from the height of her dog-cart.

"What girl?" was the perfectly innocent reply.

"I believe her name is Peggy Jones, though her friends persist in calling her 'Rosalind.' You seemed to be interested in her last night. Why has she not made it her business to see me about to-morrow's arrangements?"

"What was there to see about?" said Calvert blandly.

"Didn't you ask me to accept her as one of my Maids of Honour?"

"Yes, Lady Betty. You agreed, most graciously. The rest is merely a few minutes' detail for the costumiers."

"Nothing of the kind. You seem to forget that she will be mixing, for two hours, at least, with girls from the best families in Yorkshire. I want to assure myself that she knows how to dress and carry herself."

"Isn't that *my* business?"

"No. The Tournament is wholly outside the Pageant."

"I wish I had known that sooner. It would have saved me needless bother. But, why this argument, may I ask?"

"Because I am half inclined to change my mind, and decline to receive her."

"I hope you will not do that, Lady Betty. I am Director of both Pageant and Tournament, and my decision on any point is final. I made the suggestion that this young lady, who is writing about the Pageant, should be given a seat on your stand owing to the practical certainty that no other place will be available. I did this at the request of Mr. Richard Aylmer, to whom we all owe so much. You, very generously, helped me out of a difficulty. Miss Jones's name cannot appear on the programme. Both you and I have pledged our word. What more is there to say?"

Aylmer had been quick to detect the Napoleonic side of Calvert's character, and Lady Betty saw it now in a tightening of lips and lowering of eyebrows ominously at variance with the smooth words of explanation. She realised instantly that if she wanted war she would be given war, in full measure.

"Very well," she said pleasantly, as though the discussion were not of the slightest consequence. "The responsibility is yours, Mr. Calvert. If that is thoroughly understood, I am content. . . . All right, William!" And the fiery cob bounded toward the gate.

Calvert cast after her the look of a movie villain who, for purposes of his own, has foiled a scheme well laid by the principal vamp. The actual fact was that the London

post had brought an offer of the directorship, almost at his own terms, of a Canterbury Pageant for the following year, and he felt that, by hook or by crook, he must secure Aylmer's help, so Lady Betty had as much chance of bending this stout person to her will as of convincing the young woman who sat by her side, and who had followed the brief struggle with much relish, that she was "content" with anything or anybody.

Pamela Sturton knew better, and, oddly enough, found some tincture of consolation in the knowledge.

Rosalind and Aylmer, however, trudging homeward, with diminished energy, perhaps, but with unslaked enthusiasm for the fine effects of the setting sun on the heath-clad Hambledon Hills, knew nothing, and would have recked little had they known, of the new tribulations which awaited them in Mountford. They were weary and foot-sore, but very, very happy, and planned a pleasant little dinner at the hotel, to which Sir Claude Berkeley and Calvert and Major Randolph would be invited, with the unexpressed hope that the Lodge folk would not trouble them.

All of which happened, "according to schedule" as men say in the mart. There was no later gathering at the Castle. Everyone was tired. Rosalind slept without any preliminary tears. Aylmer cared nothing about a perfectly gorgeous moon, and discussed the cubist theory almost heatedly with Cellini over a final cigarette. Berkeley and Calvert, saying they needed exercise, walked home with Randolph, who told Calvert that something should be done to rescue a great musician like Cellini from the absurdity of his present method of life.

So peace brooded over Mountford, and the shadows had hardly deepened behind the grim walls of the Castle ere the pink dawn of another glorious day tinted their grey with rose-colour.

CHAPTER XVIII

ARMS AND THE MAN

ROSALIND, being just a girl, turned her thoughts to the ever-fascinating problem of dress at quite an early hour on the last day of the Pageant. The Director had assured her that his capable *aides* would attire her to perfection in thirty minutes by the clock, but she had heard such statements made so often, and had seen them refuted as regularly by the said clock in a fashionable West-End shop, that she determined to devote all the morning to her Maid of Honour toilette.

Therein she showed wisdom. The only fourteenth-century robe in stock strictly designed for its specific purpose—since her attire had to harmonise with the garments worn by twenty other young ladies—was what is technically known as an "out size," and such a lamentable misfit that her own nimble fingers and those of two dressmakers, eked out by rows and rows of pins, could not succeed in turning her out suitably clad until long after the luncheon-hour.

Hence, when Aylmer called for her, according to compact made overnight, he was told by Mrs. Barker that a little lass frae t' Pageant Office had coom te say Miss Jones wadn't hae time te ëat at yam, but 'ud get a bite o' summat in t' Refreshment Tent.

Notwithstanding a mental rest of a full day and a half, Aylmer flared at once into a ridiculous temper. Rosalind's train departed for London at seven o'clock that evening, and he had counted on having this farewell meal with her before escorting her to the Pageant Field. Now they might not be able to exchange a word during the Tourna-

ment, while the remaining time would be all too short for packing, a cup of tea, and a cab to the station, which last essential he had secured, unknown to the girl herself, at a very stiff price the previous evening. Thus far, he had some excuse for a spasm of annoyance, but none whatsoever for the childish petulance which led him to decline the good food Mrs. Barker had provided, and stalk back to the Castle, vowing, in high dudgeon, that he was for ever done with Mountford and its Pageant.

But, as Sir John Froissart might have said, were he permitted to watch and describe the incidents of this most notable Tournay:— "No man knoweth, from one moment to another, whither fortune may guide his steps. Many a true knight, deeming the toils of forest and wilderness well passed, and urging a stout palfrey over the last well-known league of the homeward way, has found himself beset most surprisingly by the greatest peril of his life. Well is it for such a one if he be not so overborne by the sudden attack of an enemy or some hazard of the road that his valour do not yield before the shock of it."

The chronicler of mediæval chivalry found good reason for such philosophic homilies in more than one journey through Flanders, France and Britain, nor would his pen have failed for lack of an instance in modern Mountford.

Old Mr. Barker, who, as a privileged person, was made free of the Pageant ground, was waiting at the corner of the High-street to waylay his lodger and "her young man," meaning to accompany them. He had no thought of intruding. He avowed to all and sundry that Rosalind would be "t' pick o' t' bunch" among the Queen's train, and he wanted to see and admire her in her finery, while Aylmer, at all times, was friendly. He, of course, had dined at noon, and had gone out to watch the passing show. In consequence, he knew nothing of the aban-

doned luncheon, and was in his own phrase, "regular stumped" when the tall figure in Lincoln green appeared alone, and turned down the hill toward Montfort, having, apparently, eyes for no one.

"Hi!" he shouted, raising his stick, and hobbling in pursuit. "Hi! What's t' matter noo? You've nëan ower mich tahme!"

In his anxiety to overtake Aylmer he did not notice a dog curled up on the sun-baked pavement. The weary hound was probably surfeited with excitement after four days of the coming and going of so many strange beings both a-foot and on horseback, but he sprang up with such energy when the old man's heavy foot scrunched on his forelegs that he not only filled the air with heart-rending clamour but sent the aggressor headlong into the middle of the street.

Among the Pageanteers entering the town just then was a knight in armour, riding a finely caparisoned and steel-clad charger. The animal shied, and stumbled, which he might have done a hundred times without unseating a fox-hunting farmer, but, by some special devising of fate, on this occasion the rider was thrown, and clanged to the cobblestones on to his right shoulder. The horse, partly supported by plates of mail, did not roll over, and, struggling to his feet, was promptly caught by a passer-by. But the man lay still, being stunned, or worse.

An accident of this nature, demanding cool judgment and instant decision, seemed invariably to induce in Aylmer the methodical confidence of the born man of action. He helped others in raising the fallen warrior to a sitting posture; then, unbuckling the helmet, which was hardly scratched, he was relieved by the absence of any outward sign of injury, though this did not preclude the possibility of concussion.

Someone in the small crowd which had gathered recognised the knight's face.

"Why, it's young Matthew Bolland," said a voice. "My, but this is a sad job. It'll upset yon Tournament for fair!"

Young Matthew Bolland himself removed any doubts as to his faculties being normal by demanding in pure Doric what the crimson Inferno they were all looking at, and why some Heaven-condemned fool didn't help him to rise, but an effort to use his right arm brought a gasp of pain, and his weather-tanned cheeks bleached to a ghastly yellow. Yet he had the grit of his race, for he smiled as he looked up at the man who was already detaching the right *epaulière*, or shoulder-piece, from cuirass and armlet.

"I'm afraid your namesake won't carry the family lance to-day, Mr. Richard Aylmer," he said, being bilingual, like so many others in Mountford. "If not badly smashed, my shoulder is dislocated, or perhaps, it's a broken collar-bone—I'm not sure which. . . . Hello, ye owd divvle!"—this to Barker, who had picked himself up, and had pushed forward so as to miss nothing of what was going on—"it was you 'at browt me hoss doon. Couldn't ye see t' bloomin' dog? Ah thowt ye nivver got dhrunk afore t' evenin'!"

Barker took breath for a crushing retort, but Aylmer broke in. He realised now the true nature of the difficulty which faced him.

"Mr. Bolland is badly hurt," he said, with the quietly authoritative air of the Centurion. "May we not take him into your cottage, Mr. Barker? We cannot strip off his armour in the street, and he must be attended by a doctor before he goes home."

"Ay," said the old man, curtly enough. "Tak' him in! Fifty year sen Ah laid oot his gran'feyther i' this sëam

spot, an' they had te carry *him* on a shutter te t' surgery!"

The damaged knight explained luridly that Barker himself would have occupied a plot in the churchyard fifty years ago if his, deponent's, grandfather had not caught a heel on the kerb-stone at an awkward moment, but Aylmer stopped the discussion by nodding to some willing assistants, and Bolland was lifted to his feet. It was only a few yards to the house, and, after a first cry of alarm, Mrs. Barker busied herself in arranging cushions on a settle, or oak bench, in the kitchen, while some of the men, following Bolland's own directions, removed his harness.

"Whëa's lookin' afther my hoss?" he cried suddenly. "It wasn't his fault, but that bletherin' owd doddard's, that he slipped up on t' cobbles."

Barker hustled forward with a glass containing a generous dose of whisky.

"Yer hoss is all right," he said. "He's tied te t' sneck.[1] . . . Here! Sup this. It's the on'y medicine as ivver did a Bolland anny good i' three generations."

Aylmer had ascertained, to the best of his belief, that Bolland's clavicle was fractured, and told him so.

"Oh, if that's all," said the patient cheerily, "fetch a doctor quickly. If it's tightly bandaged I can still hold a lance."

But the amateur surgeon shook his head.

"Yes, in your left hand," he agreed. "Your right arm will be strapped across your chest. I'm sorry, Mr. Bolland. There is no gallop in the lists for you this afternoon, but, if you have no objection, I shall try and prove myself a worthy deputy."

"You! By gum!" and the contents of the glass van-

[1] The outer part of the door-latch.

ished at a gulp. Evidently, Bolland did not approve the suggestion.

"Why not? I can ride. Your armour will fit me if a buckle is tightened here and there. And I shall at least be playing my own lawful part."

"Yes, of course. But what will people think?"

"You could not have foreseen your tumble, and its result."

"That's not bothering me. It's—it's——"

"It's you havin' a smack at that daft Lord Francis Grosmont!" cackled Barker excitedly. "Dang me! Ah wadn't miss that fer a pension. . . . Bash him, Misther Aylmer! Bash him where his brains owt te be! There'll be nowt te hinder ye!"

"Gran'feyther!" protested Mrs. Barker. "If ye dëan't ho'd yer silly owd toong Ah'll put ye te bed. Ah will, an' all."

Aylmer, whose mind was working now like a well-regulated machine, grasped the vital fact that those present must be laughed out of the notion that a personal feud existed between Lord Francis and himself.

"I have only to obey orders, and take defeat gracefully just as you would have done, Mr. Bolland," he said, smilingly. "I have no quarrel with Lord Francis, who, as victor in the joust, will hand a golden chaplet, whatever that may be, to the lady he will marry. . . . So, if anyone gets bashed, Mr. Barker, I am the preordained victim. Now, suppose we all show a little commonsense. The Pageant doctor is on the Field by this time. Every other medical man in Mountford will be there, too, unless I am greatly mistaken. No one, other than Mr. Calvert, need know who is inside your armour, Mr. Bolland. . . . Come along, you boys. Put me into this iron suit. I'll mount from a chair outside, though

I believe my knightly ancestor would have leaped from the ground to the saddle. I'll undertake that a doctor is here in twenty minutes. Meanwhile, that right arm must be slung in a handkerchief, and kept motionless. By the way, I had an impression that the combatants would wear silk tabards over their coats of mail?"

"Ay," said Bolland, surveying his under-study ruefully. "That was the first arrangement, but Lord Francis talked Mr. Calvert out of it, as he wanted the girls to see his gilded armour. I don't blame him. It's a fine suit."

"It'll tak' a toss to-day, Ah reckon!" wheezed Barker. Luckily for him, the clatter made by the amateur squires prevented his granddaughter from hearing this impish suggestion, which Aylmer ignored.

"I know now why I did not recognise you at once," he said to Bolland. "I would have remembered the device. Don't you bear one?"

"It's on the shield—three leopards couchant gules on a ground d'or. That, and the lances, will be supplied in the lists, as the shield has to be fastened on to the bridle arm. By the way, the harder you go the more easily the lance splinters. At the third rally you reel in the saddle, the Marshals look you over, and the verdict is given to Lord Francis. You'll find the old gee will travel straight. He has done tent-pegging by sections in the Yeomanry."

"This is a real sword. Have you no share in the mêlée?"

"Yes, by Jove! Don't forget to use a dummy one then. But Calvert will see to that."

"Well, I'm sorry for you, but you'll be given all the glory in the newspapers. I'll ask Calvert to suppress any reference to your mishap."

"Those newspaper boys don't miss much. But what

does it matter, anyhow? Some damned Barker always contrives to floor a Bolland."

"Ay, mebbe," grumbled Barker. "But we dëant thrive on 't. Ah bide (live) iv a kitchen, an' you ëat i' ya room, drink in anuther, an' smöak i' what ye call a lounge, I'm tellt."

"Ye owd fossil, ye're lucky te be wick (alive) in anny söart o' room!" was the prompt answer.

By this time Aylmer was armed cap-à-pie. He mounted his charger ingloriously, and rode off through an almost empty High-street, as all Mountford meant, by hook or by crook, to witness the Tournament, and the hour was now close on two o'clock, though the opening procession did not start till half past two, the mêlée being fixed for four, and the final joust for half an hour later.

He had pulled down his vizor, so none identified him. On leaving the cobbled highway, which was polished to the smoothness of black ice by many days of fine weather, he thought it advisable to try his war-horse's paces, and the animal responded gaily along a strip of turf by the roadside. He was more accustomed to a hunting seat, but the sheer weight of metal kept him down in the saddle, so he experienced no discomfort in riding with a straight leg. And his spirits rose wonderfully. The mere motion of the powerful animal was exhilarating, while no man who had ever faced foe in the field could fail to feel himself at home in the gallant panoply of a mediæval knight.

Drawing rein near the gate, he pulled up to a walk in order to allow a party of glee singers to enter first. Two men and two women, he took them for members of the chorus whose old-time madrigals and Tudor roundelays served to enliven the performance. Something familiar in their carriage, however, and especially the way in which the taller of the men held his left arm, enlightened him,

and he understood at once that the musical *personnel* of the Pageant would be reinforced that afternoon by the Wandering Minstrels.

He brought his horse so close to Cellini that the latter turned in wrath.

"How now, Sir Malapert!" came the ready challenge. "Is there not room enough on earth for thee and me?"

"Ay, caitiff!" growled Aylmer through the vizor's bars. "But 'tis well thou art on foot and unarmed, else would I be sore tempted to cleave thee to the brisket."

"Ho-la!" cried the surprised Cellini. "Here is some savage breast which my fiddle has not soothed! Pass on, I pray thee, noble butcher, and use thy cleaver on some thick skull like thine own."

"Nay, Maestro. You and I are votaries of the Open Road. Shall we not tread together the Pilgrims' Way —not the pleasant path which winds from the Tabard Inn to Canterbury, but that other eastern track padded by camels across the Bokharan desert? Surely you know it, you who have heard the cry of the muezzin from many a minaret? You shall be Master of the Caravan, and poor Flecker's ghost will lead us through the Gate of the Moon at Bagdad. How he will entrance us with his singing!:—

> Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
> When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
> And softly through the silence beat the bells
> Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

"What say you, brother of the lute, fount of melody, tweaker of cat-gut and lord of arpeggios—thou who has more music in thy steel wrist than lies in all the tense muscles of the Conservatoire—shall we fare forth when the moon rises, or wait till the dawn dances on the hills?"

Aylmer lifted his vizor as he began this singular

harangue, and several hurrying members of the Pageant had stopped to listen. Cellini, well aware of some happening far removed from the common rut of things, and sore perplexed by his friend's outburst, deemed it the wiser course to answer in the same grandiloquent strain.

"Oft have I conned those flowing lines and dreamed of that mystic road, O valiant knight," he said. "But the ardent rays of the desert sun will bake thee to the marrow in that iron oven, and jackals will darken the plain because of the savour of thy frizzling. Bismillah! Not in such guise canst thou jog with the Kafila."

"I have but borrowed the horse and armour of a wounded Giaour, and with them taken on his high devoir of acclaiming in the lists the peerless beauty of the noble lady of these parts. That duty done, we resume the staff and scrip of the true pilgrim. On, then! Let us find the Master of the Revels, and acquaint him with our vow!"

"At thy charger's tail, O honourable one!"

But Cellini hissed in Mannering's ear:— "Look after the ladies! The choir-leader will give you instructions. I must follow this lunatic, and find out what mad scheme he is hatching."

Now, if Aylmer had wished to announce to all and sundry that he had taken the place allotted to Matthew Bolland in the Tournay he could have chosen no better means than this piece of unrehearsed fooling with Cellini. Each had won repute locally as an eccentric genius, so none who heard what passed failed to spread the news, though, as is usual in such cases, no hint of the identity of the new "Sir Richard Aylmer" reached the ears of those mainly concerned until such a late hour that active interference behind the scenes became impossible.

Calvert, of course, knew what was toward. Aylmer,

leaving his horse in the stable lines, clanked off with Cellini, and ran the Pageant-Master to earth outside his tent, where he was cursing a hoary-headed Henry Jenkins for being dilatory in mounting his bullock. He stared hard at the new knight for a couple of seconds. Then he frowned.

"What is the special pleasantry?" he demanded, since none dared take liberties with him when work was in progress.

Aylmer explained glibly. He believed he was doing Calvert a favour, but Calvert by no means shared that view.

"I select my own under-studies when they are needed," he said stiffly. "Kindly remain here for five minutes, and I'll attend to the matter, after I have sent a doctor to Bolland."

"Our excellent Director is a trifle peeved," laughed Aylmer, whose fit of ill temper seemed to have vanished completely.

"What the devil did you expect?" said Cellini. "Hasn't there been enough talk in Mountford already without you and Lord Francis barging into one another under the very eyes of Lady Betty, and six thousand additional pairs or eyes as well?"

"Christopher Columbus! I never thought of that!"

"You may be sure Calvert is thinking hard of it this very minute."

"My dear fellow, go and fetch Lord Francis. If he raises the slightest objection I'll stand aside at once."

Cellini, a person of great intelligence, was not likely to strike the line of reasoning which would be adopted by a person of much less intelligence. He jumped at the suggestion, assuming that Lord Francis would refuse to

give the hare-brained artist the prominence he seemed to seek in this—the supreme spectacle of the Pageant.

The elegant young nobleman in question, being distinctly hot in his close-fitting armour, was cooling off in the refreshment tent, and imbibing champagne and soda-water, a mixture which some enthusiast had recommended as a thirst-quencher. He stiffened perceptibly when Aylmer's name was mentioned, but puzzled Cellini by an apparent disregard of the point really at issue.

"Too bad about poor Bolland," he said. "What rotten luck—to be pipped to-day, of all days! Does Calvert know? What does he say?"

"Mighty little. Men in authority, whether Kings or Pageant-Masters, are wisely spare of speech when underlings act without consulting them. Aylmer settled this matter for himself, which irks our excellent Director."

"Aylmer never did understand what it was to have an O.C. I heard all about him last night from a fellow who knew him in France."

Cellini swallowed something, probably an acid comment, judging from the way he compressed his lips.

"I certainly think the joust should be ridden by men born in this county," was all he said.

Still Lord Francis refused to take the bait. If such an effort were credible Cellini would have imagined he was thinking hard.

"Let's chin with Calvert," decided the oracle. "Jolly old bean, Calvert! He'll soon put things right."

Aylmer had not stirred from the entrance to Calvert's tent. He greeted Lord Francis affably.

"I'm afraid I was rude to you the night before last," he said. "Before discussing Boland's unfortunate accident I want to apologise, as I was completely in the wrong."

"Is that why you ducked the Pageant yesterday?"

"No."

"Well, 'spose we forget that matter just now. Why do you consider yourself qualified to meet me in the lists?"

By some warped method of thought Lord Francis was sure his position was impregnable, on this occasion if on none other, so he stood square-footed on his dignity. Aylmer was vastly surprised, but answered without any heat:—

"Please don't misunderstand me. I happened to see Bolland thrown, and went to his assistance. His collar-bone is broken on the right side, and he cannot use that arm for a month or more. I can wear his armour and ride his horse, and, as the available time is so limited, I offer myself in his stead."

"But there are fifty gentlemen on the field who can claim this vacant place by right."

"There is no other Richard Aylmer."

"Tosh! The name counts for nothing."

"It happens to be mine. It's you who usurp the title of a better man, Lord Francis."

"Dash it all, we're only play-actin'. More's the pity! I'd give a thousand quid to have a go at you with a real lance."

"The last time an Aylmer clashed with the man whom you represent to-day there was no dispute about the quality of the lances, and your predecessor came off badly."

"Times have changed—eh, what? Have you forgotten I offered you a place in the mêlée, and you refused?"

"Did I? I am ready to atone to-day."

"And you shall, by God! But I give you fair warning, 'Sir' Richard. I'll lam at you as hard as I know how, and you'll be on the back of a gee this time, remember."

"Thank Heaven you will not be in an aeroplane, or some innocent spectators would suffer."

"Very well. Here comes Calvert. I'll tell him the pie is baked. Here, you—" and the flushed youth turned on Cellini—"this little affair is between your pal and me. You won't blab, I suppose?"

"No," said Cellini, whose lips were now set in a thin seam.

Calvert, around whose stout form all the worries of the Pageant clustered, hardly knew what to say when informed that Lord Francis Grosmont would not hear of any other than Aylmer being chosen to represent the missing champion. But he was relieved, too. He had secured the five minutes' respite to consider how he could decline the artist's services that day yet avoid offending him so gravely that his effective help would be withheld next year. Now these two strangely constituted young men were assuring him smilingly that the matter was arranged entirely to their satisfaction.

"Capital!" he sighed, wearily mopping his forehead with a handkerchief already wet. "The mêlée is simple enough. It's just a tussle between red plumes and white ones. You, Lord Francis, don't need telling what to do in the tilting-match. I'll coach you, Aylmer, here at ten minutes to four precisely. You'll be a white plume, by the way. See to it that your feathers are changed before the mêlée. After it, you'll probably have none left. I suppose you can stick on Bolland's horse?"

"I'll try to," laughed Aylmer.

"But——"

"Oh, I can ride, if that is what you have on your mind."

"Mr. Cellini, the first chorus is gathering at the barrier. Have you glanced through the music?"

"I'm full of it. I'll bellow like an Italian buffo. If I were not allowed to sing now, I'd howl."

He made off. Near the performers' gate, a painted structure representing a Norman arch set in a tall yew hedge, he found Rosalind talking with Major Randolph. Both were scrutinising the ever-changing crowd, probably in quest of Aylmer. Cellini hesitated, but only for a second.

"No," he communed, with a sardonic grin. "Who am I that I should strive against the gods?"

He passed within a few yards, but neither recognised him in his jongleur's costume. As he marched through the arena a few minutes later, singing lustily, he saw that the Queen of Beauty was on her throne; Rosalind, though well in the background, was not difficult to pick out among the bevy of Maids of Honour.

His party lined up near the stand which held Mr. Legard and his guests in the front row. Moved by some impulse which he did not even try to define, he seized an opportunity to snatch a word with Sir James Macpherson.

"Will you be in Mountford to-morrow morning, Sir James?" he enquired.

"I was not thinking of it," said the Scot, wondering who this saturnine-faced musician could be.

"I ask because I've heard you are interested in Mr. Aylmer, and I am his friend. I am very anxious we three should meet and have a serious talk. Your advice will go a long way with him."

"What's wrong wi' the lad noo?"

"Everything. He's cracking up. I see all the symptoms."

"Are you a docthor?"

"No, just a plain fool, but over forty."

Plus Fours, being a good Samaritan, promptly offered to send Sir James to the Castle in a car about eleven o'clock. Cellini, on his part, was minded to pledge the Minstrels for a concert at Legard's place in the evening, but forbore, meaning to await the outcome of the next day's conference. Reviewing events long afterwards, he claimed modestly that whatever the plans of the Olympian deities might have been for the sensational close of the Mountford Pageant, he, the iron-fisted fiddler, had certainly furthered their august decisions by no small measure of ingenuity in carrying them out.

Nor did his activities cease then. When his group sang themselves back through the arch, his quick eyes discerned Major Randolph astride the great Cleveland bay, waiting for the advance of the tableau in which he took part. The soldier, an impressive figure in armour, did not need to be told who was addressing him.

"Aylmer?" he said, meeting Cellini's steady gaze without a flicker of emotion in his own features. "No. I have not seen him. Miss—Rosalind—is quite distressed because he is not here."

"But he is. He rides in the Tournay against Lord Francis Grosmont. . . . I'm not crazy. That is a positive fact. Bolland has injured his shoulder, so Aylmer is deputising. He wears Bolland's armour, and rides his horse. You are well up in pigsticking, I suppose?"

"Pigsticking! Yes."

"And Grosmont served a year in India with his regiment?"

"I believe so."

"Well, as no man breathing loves a square deal more than you, find Aylmer and give him a few tips."

"What for? To pip Grosmont?"

"Anyhow, to stop Grosmont from pipping him."

"Er—I say—you're not humbugging?"

"Not on my life! This time the penny has both head and tail, so it's even money on either Dickie or Frankie."

Hence it came to pass that Randolph clanked up to Aylmer when a tuft of ordinary white feathers was being substituted for the magnificent *panache,* or plume, which decorated the casque.

"Is this yarn that I hear true?" he said gruffly.

"It all depends on what you have heard," was the reply. Aylmer spoke quite naturally, but, as his face was now clearly visible, Randolph detected a peculiar gleam in the other's eyes which he attributed to excitement. He knew better before the day ended.

"That you're going to ride against Grosmont?" he went on.

"Yes—that's right."

"It's all wrong, from every point of view. Does Calvert approve?"

"I imagine he's delighted, but he's wilting visibly owing to unease of body and spirit."

"Have you ever had a lance in your hand before?"

"Scores of times."

"Indeed. When?"

A look of dismay chased the smiling banter from Aylmer's face.

"Do forgive me," he said. "I was talking at random. No. I know nothing about lances. Now—if I had a machine-gun strapped on that high pommel, and the horse would only keep his head down——"

"But you'll be at the mercy of a man who knows how to thrust, even with a make-believe spear."

"So Grosmont says. He has promised to 'lam' me, which is, I take it, a form of 'lame,' as used in the best livery stables."

"Ah! Cellini was right."

"Where does Cellini come in?"

"He sent me to you."

"A strange fellow. At first he was all against my meeting Grosmont. Then he seemed to favour it. And the odd thing is that it is Cellini, and not Grosmont, who should be my adversary to-day."

"For Heaven's sake, why?"

"It's his name, you know. But you don't know. How stupid of me! Will you please forget I said that?"

Aylmer was so distressed by the slip that Randolph felt obliged to reassure him.

"Cellini and I were acquainted when you were a small boy at school," he said. "That is something for you to forget, so we are quits. But, about this tilting business —let me explain. The lances actually used in the lists were very heavy, so they had to be 'couched' between the right upper arm and the ribs, and supported, as well, on a short steel bar braced to the cuirass. . . . What are you grinning at?"

"You mean the *faucre.*"

"Do I? That's odd. You're always bringing out queer statements like that. Look here! We haven't much time. If you *know* these things——"

"Please, don't be vexed, Major. I'm not quite myself to-day. Some day soon— But, on my honour, I have never grasped a lance since I was born, not even here, where there are scores lying about."

Randolph shook his head perplexedly.

"Very well," he said. "Listen, now, carefully. Both the cavalry soldier and the man who goes after pig is taught to turn the right wrist so that the butt of the lance passes clear of the rider's body when the point is engaged. If that vital movement is forgotten the shaft is

liable to travel round and knock you out of the saddle; the faster the pace the harder the blow. Again, at the moment of impact, you press down the left foot to counteract the inclination of the body to the right. These instructions, bear in mind, are meant for modern conditions. I should imagine, however, that the knight in armour depended altogether on weight and speed to lend effect if he kept the lance straight. But the weapon you will use is meant to crumple up, so, to my thinking, a combination of the two methods is the only effective one. Do you follow?"

"Even a splintering lance will shake the other fellow if held in the pig-sticking way, and allowed to shiver to the butt."

"Exactly. It's only a theory, but—er——"

"You will not be moved to tears if Lord Francis tries some dodge of the sort?"

"It is—er—wise to be prepared for eventualities."

"And the defence?"

"At this game the proper defence is to attack."

"Then both of us will be tricky."

"Yes—it's difficult. I hate to prejudice anyone. But, for the first go, I'd rely on sheer weight. Lean well forward, and to the right. You have to strike each other's shields, you know. Anything else is a faulty thrust, and, if points were allotted, would count against you."

A great voice boomed through a megaphone:—

"Gentlemen will assemble for the mêlée. All swords and belts must be removed. Reds parade on the right, whites on the left. All march off in five minutes."

Aylmer unbuckled his sword, and handed it to Bolland's groom for safe keeping.

"Thanks, major," he said. "Though the pupil has to be beaten he will try not to disgrace his Mentor."

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIGHT

THE Pageant-Master was undeniably a first-rate showman. He knew full well that the mere slicing of cocks' feathers from steel helmets by dummy swords no less than the thunderous crash of two gallant knights in armour of proof, only to splinter lances frail as reeds, would provide the tamest of *dénouements* to the really beautiful and picturesque review of English history which the Pageant had staged during four memorable days. Therefore, he treated these two episodes as moving pictures rather than serious attempts to copy actualities. It was well meant, but, as it happened, he had no personal experience either of war or of its mimicry in peace-time manœuvres. He did not suspect that cavalry charging guns in an Aldershot valley under the critical scrutiny of a Commander-in-Chief can dash madly among the gunners, and use their sabres. If he saw red-eyed men fighting with bayonets for a bridge-head from which the unconvinced defenders had been driven by blank cartridges (and an umpire) he would have thought rightly that they had all gone mad. Yet these things are done. But he learnt a good deal at Mountford. He was taught that Shakespeare delved deep into the morass of human psychology when he caused an evil-minded King to utter the bitter plaint:— "How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds makes ill deeds done!"

He had some excuse, however, for giving full play to the instincts of the stage manager that afternoon, since no theatre pent within walls could set so fair a scene as the meadows of Mountford, with their background of

the moors, the ancient castle, the gin-clear reaches of the river, and the red roofs of the little town peeping through a screen of trees decked in their densest foliage. The sun, after the well-nigh intolerable glare of noon, was now at an angle which displayed all colours at their best. A pleasant breeze had sprung up from the southeast, just sufficient to flutter pennons and bannerets and silken cloaks. Armour gleamed, plumes tossed, and the well-groomed coats of picked horses in perfect condition glistened with the sheen of satin.

With pardonable pride in the visible product of a well-stored mind—the elation of an artist who sees the triumphant end of his work—Calvert gathered forty steel-clad knights behind the yew hedge, and issued some final instructions. They were drawn up in two ranks, Reds and Whites, facing each other. Lord Francis and Aylmer, as the champions who would soon dispute for the privilege of crowning the Queen of Beauty—"Queen of Love and Beauty" the old jousters had it, but Lady Betty thought "the love stuff" was "mushy," so it was ruled out—being the leaders. With few exceptions, the forty represented the chief families of the North Riding. Mere chance had led to Bolland being chosen as Lord Francis's opponent. Being a squadron officer of yeomanry, he was versed in military sports, and, further, he had suggested the mêlée, while he had acted as sword-instructor during the rehearsals. No man grudged him a distinction earned by good, solid endeavour, while few were aware that he was not now actually sitting his charger in his allotted place, because Calvert, for better effect, had ordered all vizors to be lowered. He had already, of course, coached Aylmer in his rôle.

"Gentlemen," said the Director, after an appreciative survey of the cohort, "I shall repeat briefly the conditions

governing the combat. After the march past you will line up, at full sword-arm-distance, on your respective sides of the quadrangle. When the Chief Herald bids you fall to, the bugles will sound a single, prolonged 'G.' At the conclusion of the note, not before, each knight will at once attack the knight facing him. Your horses must not be allowed to break into a gallop. The correct pace is that of a musical ride. No thrusts—only fair cut and parry. No knight may be attacked by two adversaries simultaneously, but, if combatants are separated, they may find and engage new opponents, first crying 'Have at thee, Red!'—or 'White,' as the case may be, and receiving an answer in the same terms before closing. When a second 'G' sounds, in five minutes, or such shorter period as the Marshals may determine, fighting stops instantly, and knights take up their original stations. And please remember you are playing in a Pageant, not trying to kill one another. The objective is the plume, not an opponent's head."

"What if a sword breaks, or is dropped?" came a voice.

"That knight, being disarmed, goes back to his place, and remains there. His adversary may deliver but one cut after the accident happens, but you will be hitting far too hard if a piece of seasoned ash, reinforced by strips of steel, gets broken, while the sword-knot, which the attendants will now adjust, should prevent the loss of any weapon."

The warriors, who had exercised hitherto with single-sticks, examined their new "swords" with some curiosity. The component materials were hidden by steel-coloured paper, but the broad, straight blades looked fearsome enough. Their weight, however, was trifling, which fact permitted of real dexterity in use.

A fanfare of trumpets in the arena announced the

advent of a dozen Marshals with their squires, a group of gorgeously attired Heralds on horseback and on foot, and a bodyguard of archers in green and men-at-arms in buff coats, shining morions, and reddish brown breeches and stockings. Each of the Marshals was a peer of the realm, and wore the robes and insignia of any famous ancestor he could claim from the Middle Ages. The Heralds' tabards were rich in gold braid, and the banners carried by both squires and heralds flaunted many a device seen and feared at Agincourt and Cressy. The Chief Herald, an ex-sergeant-major of cavalry, with a voice of remarkable range and penetrating clearness, announced that the forthcoming mêlée would represent the Wars of the Roses.

"Forty noblemen and gentlemen of England will now uphold the honour of the Royal Houses of York and Lancaster!" he proclaimed. "Milords Marshals—be pleased to select your places! Heralds of Lancaster—sound a challenge! Heralds of York—sound a defiance!"

The Marshals, Heralds, and their attendants split into two equal groups, and moved to either end of the arena, Lancaster being on the left and York on the right of the central gallery of state in which were the Queen and her maids.

Bursts of shrill music, twice repeated, came alternately from the rival trumpeters. Then, while a concealed band played a wild Saracenic March, the doors of the Norman arch were thrown wide, and the knights rode forth, each leader inclining at once to his proper side of the enclosure, until all were pacing in single files its full length of two hundred yards. Lord Francis passed close under the Queen's throne, while Aylmer headed his detachment along the opposite row of stands.

At that moment the grandeur of the scene was comparable only with the military pomp of some memorable

Tournay of the dim past. The rich dresses of the men in the arena literally outshone those of the women among the thousands of spectators, though gay modern costumes were enhanced by the presence in each gangway and at the four corners of the rectangle of every female member of the Pageant. All the armour was genuine and of fine quality, but fully one-half of the knights wore heirlooms of fabulous value. The horses were hunters or chargers from well-known cavalry regiments, and there was not a man in the enclosure, who, if of military age, had not served during the Great War. A fitting nucleus of this rendezvous of chivalry, the Queen's Throne was raised somewhat above the other stands. Its gilded canopy was festooned with white and red roses; high above, by special permission, floated the royal standard of England, with the flags of York and Lancaster supporting it in amity.

By common consent Lord Francis Grosmont was the most striking figure among the combatant knights. His armour of polished steel was inlaid with gold, in an intricate pattern so cunningly designed by some Florentine genius who came to England in the reign of Edward I. that the solid plates seemed to undulate in the sunlight as the rider's body swayed. And the armourer was also an artist. Each curve, each over-lapping joint, in a coat of mail invulnerable by sword or lance, was in such harmony with the whole design that all sense of weight and solidity was lost, and the wearer might have been clothed in some ornate brocade rather than unyielding metal.

Aylmer, who drew many eyes because of his position among the Yorkists, was protected by a steel suit hammered out on an anvil strictly for business. Its dull surface bore the dints and scratches of actual use. It had come from a Tees-side manor, and had evidently turned

aside many a deadly thrust in days when men held their lands more securely by the sword than by black-letter parchment.

Calvert had intended that the warriors should pace the arena with grim disregard of the onlookers, but Lord Francis, well aware of the interest he was arousing, could not refrain from saluting Lady Betty with his sword. He did not know that Aylmer was not a second behindhand in offering a similar courtesy. The Queen bowed twice, and waved her hand, and the little incident broke the spell which the stately beauty of the procession had imposed on the audience, whereupon a clamour of applause drowned the music, and caused Lord Francis's horse to curvet over the next fifty yards.

On reaching the farther end of the rectangle the two lines passed each other, and, at this point, each knight solemnly acknowledged with uplifted sword the presence of his allotted antagonist. Two Marshals galloped to the centre of the ground, and indicated with batons where each horseman was to rein up. In consequence, Lord Francis now faced the Queen in the centre, and Aylmer had his back to her, their followers taking station alternately to right and left.

No time was lost thereafter. The Chief Herald, in clarion tones, cried:— "Milords and gentlemen of York and Lancaster, show your knightly prowess! *Laissez aller!*" a trumpet sounded the charge, and, in the twinkling of an eye, the Pageant Field became a pandemonium of wheeling, prancing steeds and whirling swords.

The fight proceeded on the lines common to all such contests. Men cared little whether they sheered through a bunch of feathers or delivered resounding thwacks on sonorous helmets. An element of comedy was introduced when two enthusiasts, having broken their weapons

on each other's steel crowns, each hitting with all his might at the same instant, and each supremely disdainful of a guard when the way was open for a cut, tried to snatch a feather trophy in a mailed hand. Another spirited youth forgot the law of gravity when his horse executed a pirouette, so he broke a stirrup-leather, and fell with a fearful din. Rising unhurt, however, he caught his charger, and remounted from the offside, a feat which earned him a well-merited cheer.

Public interest gradually centred in the struggle between the two leaders. Aylmer had been taught the sword exercise as a formality during his army training, but Lord Francis was a cavalry officer, and somewhat of an expert with the sabre. He counted on an easy victory, in this instance, at any rate, and chose deliberately to attack his adversary on the left, or bridle side, thus placing an inexperienced swordsman at a serious disadvantage. But a man accustomed to using a machine-gun from an aeroplane travelling at a hundred miles an hour against an enemy heading for him at the same pace forms a habit of quick decision which the much slower movement of a horse cannot disconcert.

Aylmer, finding that his mount was flexible as a polo pony, did not attempt to parry. He simply avoided the first sweeping blow by bending low in the saddle; at the same time he turned, and Lord Francis had to guard with prompt dexterity to save his own red tuft, while he had no option but to circle round, and meet a lively onslaught sword-arm to sword-arm. Thenceforth, Aylmer contented himself with defence rather than aggression. Time and again Red slashed at White, always to meet an opposing blade, which, though quiescent for the most part, never failed to strike back at an opportune moment. Then that happened which White had counted on—Red

lost his temper, rose in his stirrups, and drove his horse headlong at White's. This false move would infallibly have cost him his own plume if another rider had not barged into him accidentally. So Aylmer's wooden blade halted in mid-air, a fact noted by many an expert eye in the stands. These connoisseurs cheered, and the multitude did not know why, but the battle was stopped summarily by the Marshals, who decided that some of the sword-play in other parts of the field was becoming unruly.

Two Earl-Marshals then rode slowly along both ranks. The four-footed contestants showed signs of the fray by foam-flecked bits and distended nostrils; but the critics were merely counting plumes. Having agreed on their verdict, the Chief Herald elicited general applause by declaring that each Noble House had three survivors, so each was equal to the other in valour and achievement. Again the music rang out, the leaders reversed the order of the first march, and, as the last pair of knights vanished beneath the arch, the appearance of a party of morris-dancers alone stilled the storm of enthusiasm which the display had evoked.

Lord Francis rode off to the horse lines without a word to anyone. He was still in a rage over his quite unexpected failure. Making for the refreshment tent, he swallowed another tumbler-full of champagne and soda-water.

"My luck is dead out!" he complained to a friend. "That chap Aylmer couldn't fence for nuts, yet he kept me off."

"Couldn't fence!" came the surprised comment.

Then Grosmont realised that he had almost blurted out a fact which, by tacit agreement, was to be kept hidden if possible.

"Well," he laughed angrily, "what I mean is that he

didn't try any stunts. I don't think he cut at me once to my six."

Such reticence was not needed now, however. Aylmer had scarce reined in his horse before a tall young fellow in the court attire of a knight, with his right arm bound tightly across his chest, caught the bridle with the free hand.

"Well played, Sir Richard!" he said cheerfully. "I had to come and see the show, and I enjoyed it almost as much as though I was in it."

Aylmer raised his vizor, as every other man had done. He showed no sign of unusual effort, whereas the faces of the rest were streaming with perspiration.

"Ah!" he said, speaking like one just awakened from sleep and dreams, "that you, Bolland? Weren't you—? Yes, of course, you were hurt."

"I should jolly well think I was, and am, for that matter. But Pills said I might walk here if I didn't twist my neck too much. Did the good old gee carry you all right?"

"I would trust my life to him anywhere, and hope to do so before I am many minutes older."

It was a strange answer, but then, reflected Bolland, this artist was reputed a strange fellow.

"You must be fit as a fiddle to go through that scrap without turning a hair," he rattled on. "Well, dismount now, old chap, and have a drink while they are replacing your plume. My man will ease Tom-boy's girths for the next quarter of an hour."

"Tom-boy! Is that how you call him? He ought to be known as Attila, a name of terror."

Bolland said afterwards that he thought Aylmer was "a bit up in the air." He was again going to suggest a whisky and soda as a "bracer," but a very pretty girl

in fourteenth-century costume—a girl whom he had never before seen though he knew every man, woman and child playing in the Pageant—ran up and said, with a hysterical break in her voice:—

"Oh, Cæsar, how *could* you? You know you should not have taken part in this performance."

Aylmer's set features relaxed into a charming smile.

"Why, it's my little Rosalind!" he cried. "How wonderful you look! That dress suits you to perfection. Dear heart, I know now who shall reign over these lists as Queen of Beauty!"

"Cæsar! Cæsar!" she almost wailed. "What has happened to you? Why are *you* in armour? Are *you* going to ride against Lord Francis?"

She turned frantically to Bolland.

"Oh, sir," she said, while tears trembled in her eyes, "if you have any influence, please get Mr. Calvert to interfere. Mr. Aylmer is not fit to appear again in the enclosure. I—I am a friend of his, and I know I am right."

Bolland was absolutely tongue-tied, but Aylmer, still smiling most pleasantly, placed a gauntleted hand on Rosalind's shoulder.

"Little girl," he said gently, "have you forgotten that only yesterday you stood in reverie beside the tomb of the man whose good lance snatched a bride from the hands of that recreant knight, Guilbert de Lancy? Would you have me be false to my ancestry, and draw back now when some popinjay strutting in the guise of one who, with all his faults, never feared man or devil, vaunts his right to crown a Queen? If I did not love you so dearly I would be angry with you."

At that, Bolland found speech.

"At any rate," he said, lowering his tone like one

engaged in a conspiracy, though to this day he cannot explain what possessed him at the moment, "here come Calvert, Major Randolph, and Tommy Trenholme. This thing must be settled now. Whether or not you meet Grosmont, there can be no question about Lady Betty being given the chaplet. Just remember you represent me as well as that lad lying in his tomb, whoever he may have been!"

"Very well!" said Aylmer, dismissing Lady Betty's claim to the throne as though it were a matter of a trivial important. "If that is my gauge to-day I shall keep it."

Calvert, bustling up light-heartedly, because the success of the mêlée had surpassed his secret hopes, greeted Aylmer like a long-lost brother.

"Splendid, my boy!" he chortled. "That turn went with a bang. It couldn't have been better. 'Pon my honour, nobody else——"

Then his eye fell on Bolland.

"Hello!" he cried. "*You* here? Well, I'm sorry for your tumble, but you certainly sent me a dam—er—a dashed good deputy. . . . Now, Aylmer, don't forget. Grosmont and you ride in together, he on the right, walking pace. You each take a lance as you enter. You wheel left in front of the Queen, lower your lances, and bow. Then you return to this end. When the bugle sounds, off you go! Of course, you keep to the left of the barrier. Be sure and roll about a bit in the saddle after the third career. You'll have plenty of time for a breather before the grand procession. . . . I see they're bringing your casque and sword. Grosmont is mounting, too. Be ready! I'll just pop to my peep-hole and make sure the barrier is properly set."

He made off. A handkerchief was worse than useless.

He simply drew a forefinger between his neck and a collar that was a limp rag.

Rosalind, wan-cheeked and tremulous of lip, appealed to Major Randolph.

"Can nothing be done?" she murmured brokenly. "Don't you see? It may kill him!"

The soldier did not agree with her, and was frank about it.

"Aylmer is not incurring the slightest risk," he declared. "He rides well, and three gallops of little over a hundred yards each won't tire him half so much as the mêlée. What are you frightened of?"

"Come, Rosalind!" laughed Aylmer. "They're an unsympathetic gang, take them as you will. Now, be a good, obedient girl, and gird me with my sword. I'll couch three lances for you, but the chaplet goes to Lady Betty. Will that content you?"

What was she to do? The Pageant-Master was manifestly delighted with the whole affair. Even Major Randolph, to whom she had run distractedly for news of Aylmer, after vainly searching a thousand faces for sight of him, made light of the tilting-match. Aylmer himself, too, having scared her badly, had promised not to create the sensation his careless words foreshadowed. And he certainly had borne himself magnificently in the sword-fight. Her throbbing heart even now leaped for joy when she recalled a timid whisper to the girl by her side:

"That man is a true knight. He carries himself like one!"

So she summoned a brave smile, took the sword, with its belt and baldrick, adjusted them over the cuirass with deft hands, and, yielding to impulse, kissed the cross-shaped hilt. There was no make-believe about this blade. It was reputed to have cleft the helm of an enterprising

Frenchman, at Poitiers, who swung an axe at the Black Prince.

Sir John Froissart winked knowingly at his friend, the erstwhile Sir Richard Aylmer, but Bolland paid no heed. For one thing, he was disturbed, having seen and heard more than he understood; for another, being impressionable, he regarded the living Aylmer as an exceptionally lucky person.

Lord Francis rode up. Something was troubling him. He might be those things he was variously described as being:— "A bit of a snob," or "a bit of a fool," but he was certainly a gentleman by instinct as well as by birth.

Raising his vizor, he said:—

"How do you propose carrying your lance?"

"In the orthodox way," replied Aylmer.

"That would be all right if it weighed twenty pounds, but the things we use hardly weigh two pounds."

"What does that matter?"

"Not much, only I'd prefer having the shaft outside my elbow, if you don't mind."

"Not a scrap. Still, I'm glad you warned me."

Grosmont's face could not possibly become any redder, but a gleam of astonishment flickered in his eyes.

"All right!" he said, giving Rosalind a quick glance. "Those are the Heralds' trumpets. Shall we push on?"

Rosalind hurried back to the Queen's stand. Those few words between the two young men had renewed all her anxieties. Should she warn Lady Betty that Aylmer had taken Bolland's place? She was quite sure that none of the others, none of the Maids of Honour, at any rate, knew of the change, because they had been discussing Bolland's gallant appearance, and one girl, true to type, had said canonically:—

"He is only a farmer, but he comes of an old family,

and blood will tell, you know, whether in men or gee-gees."

Yet, what useful purpose would be served by disturbing Lady Betty now—even if such a thing were practicable? The Queen sat in the centre of her handmaidens, whereas Rosalind was in the back row. It would be difficult to get a word with her; Lord Mountford, Professor Hartley-Browne, the Lord Lieutenant, a general from York and other men were grouped at the rails below the stand, but the two nearest gangways were hopelessly blocked by people who had failed to secure seats.

So Rosalind kept a stiff upper lip, and astonished the youthful aristocrat who attributed all excellence to pedigree by remarking that if Sir Guilbert looked like a well-born knight Sir Richard was more her ideal of a warrior!

Calvert, satisfied that the lists were set correctly, had an eye for the contestants when they halted for a few seconds in the archway. He made it a rule never to enter the arena during a performance. Trusting to prior training, once a scene was launched he let his people do their best on their own account. Perhaps he had noticed more than Rosalind imagined before bustling away so promptly. Be that as it may, he gave the jousters a warning word:—

"Remember, you two, the lance point must strike the opposing shield, so hold your left forearms well over. Otherwise, in the effort to find the target, you may hit the horse's head, and cause trouble. If neither of you gets excited there is no fear of accident."

He received no answer. Men and horses stood like statues. But the Pageant-Master was not to be quelled in that fashion.

"Did you hear what I said?" he demanded. "If so,

kindly reply. The gate does not open until I give the signal."

"Right-o!" said one hollow voice.

"The stage waits," rumbled the other.

Even then, at the eleventh hour and fifty-ninth minute, he had a sense of unease, but, as he confessed afterwards, what was a fellow to do when he was dealing with two such perfect idiots—one an erratic genius and the other a conceited ass? So he nodded to the man in charge of the door, which swung outward in sections, and the antagonists passed slowly into public view.

The Chief Herald had already announced the terms of the combat—how these puissant Knights, Sir Guilbert de Lancy and Sir Richard Aylmer, would now ride three courses to determine which should have the honour of handing to the chosen Queen of Beauty the golden chaplet that was the tribute of her loyal subjects then present.

The band played a barbaric melody—some Moorish fantasia which Calvert had obtained from a Spanish Academy—while the combatants took the lances offered them by squires, and carried through the stately ceremonial which preceded the more thrilling display. The weapons looked realistic enough to excite fear of the consequences among those not in the secret of their composition. Apparently both heavy and solid, their shining heads seemed to be of murderous quality. Indeed, a quite perceptible thrill—sure premonitory symptom of the breathlessness accompanying a nerve-racking display which may result in death or permanent injury to those taking part in it—swept through the audience when the two mailed figures separated, and faced each other at the opposing ends of the barrier, a strip of stout canvas, covered with purple and gold cloth, about three feet high, and supported on iron rods, which ran down the centre

of the rectangle for about one hundred and fifty yards.

No man or woman among the thousands gathered around the lists had ever witnessed so brilliant a scene as that spread before their eyes when the Chief Herald advanced from the group of Marshals and their attendants who faced the Queen. All the Knights who had shared in the mêlée, and, indeed, every performer who carried arms in any capacity, collected at the archway or at the other extremity of the ground, while archers and halberdiers alternately lined the longer sides of the rectangle.

The Chief Herald, conscious of a great moment, paused and looked around with the glance of an autocrat surveying the rank and fashion of a mighty kingdom. Then, in his piercing notes, he cried three times:—

"Faites vos devoirs, preux chevaliers!"

Using the English tongue, he announced that any person whatsoever who interfered with or tried to disturb this fair field by cry or action would meet with instant death, and, so dramatic was he in voice and manner, it was by no means unlikely that axe or sword would speedily have routed the misguided individual who tried to break into the sacred space at that moment.

He withdrew. The senior Earl Marshal, moving his horse a little in front of his companions, glanced quickly to right and left to make sure the champions were ready. Waving his baton, he shouted:—

"Laissez aller!"

A trumpet blared, and at once the two chargers were in motion. Those onlookers unaccustomed to cavalry combats were struck instantly by the fact that not only did the rival knights clash with unexpected rapidity, but the combined height of horses and men was diminished by several feet when the powerful animals stretched into full

gallop and their riders crouched in the saddle. They met in front of the Queen's stand, and passed like a whirlwind through a cloud of splinters, for the lances acted most realistically, and the shock of their impact on the opposing shields was loud enough to satisfy the most bloodthirsty small boy among the spectators.

Many men—in fact, every soldier present—saw that Aylmer had couched his lance correctly, whereas Lord Francis held his forearm and wrist well away from his body. In consequence, Aylmer received a much more forcible blow that he delivered. Heads were shaken at this, and it was noticed by the same well-informed critics that the Marshals broke into a hasty consultation. But, even had these gentlemen so desired, they had little chance of intervention. The trumpeter had his orders, and, as soon as he was certain each knight had secured a fresh lance and was in position, the martial call rang out again. The second course provided an exact replica of the first; Aylmer withstood the straight thrust as if he were a Centaur and not a man on horseback. So the Marshals were reassured. Lord Francis's tactics were failing. Strive as he might, the weight of metal overcame the very real advantage conferred by the modern way of handling a lance.

"Still, it's hardly cricket," muttered a noble viscount, world-famed as a judge at horse-shows and theatrical *premières*.

"No," agreed his friend, an even more noble marquis. "For some cause or another, Frankie seems to be in a rotten bad temper. If he pips that chap I shall be horribly annoyed with him."

"Pip *him*?" was the scornful whisper. "Frankie will be lucky if he doesn't get pipped himself. Bolland sits as

tight as a lump on a log. Odd thing! I always thought him a trifle loose in the saddle."

The warriors had wheeled for the third and last essay when a queer, cracked voice came from a stand reserved for Mountford people only.

"Bash him, Sir Richard!" it yelled. "Bash him this tahme!"

Public interest was so manifest in a tense silence that the cry was heard clearly, and many recognised the unruly enthusiast, whose ninety-four years would not have saved him from a storm of angry remonstrance if the fateful trumpet had not drowned its first mutterings, and drawn all eyes to the lists. Calvert had arranged that Lord Francis should ride two courses with his right side to the Queen, thus giving her twice the best view of the pre-ordained victor. Hence, in this, which might be regarded as the deciding round, Sir Guilbert faced the Pageant's screened-off enclosure, while Sir Richard faced west, toward the castle of the de Montforts.

The sun was not yet sufficiently low over the hills or far enough to the west that its slanting rays should dazzle Aylmer's vision, yet, by some occult physiological action of body on mind, there can be little doubt that a momentary glimpse of the valley of the Slee, with the frowning walls of the ancient fortress in the middle distance, supplied the slight but irresistible pressure needed to turn the balance from reason to unreason until then wavering uncertainly in Aylmer's brain. His own testimony on the point cannot be gainsaid. When he wheeled for the third rally, and grasped the new lance proffered by an attendant, he was no longer Richard Aylmer, ex-airman, artist, semi-Bohemian and Socialist dreamer, but a fierce and implacable Norman, who held honour and love and life itself as tenable only by the length of a sword-blade.

The man against whom he straightway put his horse in motion was Sir Guilbert de Lancy, a bold and crafty member of his own order, and this was a fight to a finish, on horseback or on foot, with lance, sword, or dagger, or all these. Have at him, then! Thrust home with every ounce of weight and the supremest effort of taut muscles. What was that about hitting a shield? Pooh! Behind the shield was a man. If the shield went the man went with it. So-ho! The point of the lance through the heart of the golden eagle embossed as a device on the double convex of the *targe,* above and behind which streamed the blue and white plume of his enemy. And, you, good *destrier,* launch forward on those powerful haunches just at the very moment of impact. . . . *Now!* . . . Ah! That accursed lance had crumbled again, yielded up to the very vamplate, leaving only the grip intact! But something had given away. He caught a crash and a shout. He reined in a charger more than willing to obey. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a gilded figure prostrate on the turf, and a riderless horse galloping toward the Norman arch.

So the knave was unmasked at last. Now to finish him! Why were those fools of heralds and men-at-arms crowding in between him and his mortal foe? Did they not know the laws of the Tournay when the fight was *à l'outrance?* Cantering down the reverse side of the barrier he drove his horse in among the startled attendants and scattered them effectually. Springing from the saddle, he drew his sword, and inserted its point at that slit in the vizor where his fallen antagonist's teeth were most likely to be found.

"Now, Guilbert de Lancy," he cried, "yield thee or die!"

CHAPTER XX

THE END OF THE PAGEANT

A TUMULT of cries, even of shrieks, arose on every hand.

The Senior Earl Marshal, a North-Country peer famous for his tact—he had been known to pacify a Church Congress at loggerheads over the Eastern position, and induce some thousands of suspicious miners to accept a reduction of wages—did not wait to be assured by colleagues or Pageant-Master that there had been a grave departure from the programme. This hurling of Lord Francis to earth, and his opponent's resultant threat to take his life, if, indeed, he were not dead already, were deeds far more eloquent than words. Spurring his horse forward, he addressed the sinister figure bending over the prostrate knight.

"What's this?" he said, speaking gravely, but in as low a tone as possible, since his immediate object was to put an end to a painful incident. "Why this unwarranted attack on an unarmed and apparently senseless man?"

Aylmer raised his vizor, revealing a pallid face from which blazed a pair of eyes devoid of any semblance of reason.

"Do you proclaim him vanquished, Sir Marshal?" he demanded in a reedy, high-pitched voice which bore no sort of relation to his ordinary speech. He might have been some Grand Seigneur condescending to the tongue of the bazaar.

"I do, most certainly."

"I accept your ruling, and permit him to live. Give me the Queen's chaplet."

By this time many people had recognised Aylmer.

Some hundreds had been told already that he was acting in Bolland's stead, so the overthrow of Lord Francis sent the news buzzing through all the stands. Even the Earl Marshal had some glimmering knowledge of the feud between these two, and his judicial difficulties were not lightened by the fact that a hush fell on the spectators when he and the "mad artist" began discussing matters. He glanced at Lady Betty, and saw that she was whiter than any rose of York. Then he looked for Calvert's approach, since definite guidance might be expected from that quarter, but the Director, having watched the start of the third course, felt assured that all was well with that particular event, and had hurried away to arrange the leading ranks of the grand procession which would mark the close of the Pageant.

So the Earl Marshal, despite his repute, did hesitate a few seconds before complying with Aylmer's quite unexpected request. He soon made up his mind, however. Lord Francis stirred, and tried to raise himself, only to be pressed flat ignominiously by his conqueror's foot.

"Bide thee, recreant!" said Aylmer, still using that strange falsetto note. "Thy fate is not yet settled, it would seem."

At the same instant a tall, dark-featured man, dressed as a mediæval minstrel, touched the Earl Marshal's knee.

"It's a choice between two scandals," he murmured. "Either you overpower Aylmer, in which case someone will probably be killed, or you let him present the chaplet. I recommend the latter method. The Home Secretary would prefer it, I'm sure."

The Earl Marshal had not the least notion who this counsellor could be, but his words were those of one well versed in affairs.

"Master Herald," he said, with calm dignity, as though fulfilling his high duties to the letter, "hand the chaplet to the victorious champion."

He waited until the astonished Chief Herald had complied with the order. Then, while Aylmer was calmly pushing down with his mailed foot one of the supports of the barrier, so that he might lead his horse to the Queen's throne, the man of tact bent over and whispered to some members of his train:—

"Help Lord Francis to his feet, but hustle him away. On no account allow him to return here!"

Thus it came to pass that Calvert, moved to extraordinary physical exertion by wild reports eddying around him like leaves whirling in an autumn gale, met Lord Francis being escorted, with increasing unwillingness on his part, through the gateway. Even he, the skilled director, steeped to the eyebrows in the mysteries of the *coulisses*, one who could bully an amalgamated engineer and awe a federated stage carpenter, was stricken almost dumb by the depth and sincerity of Lord Francis's language.

Almost dumb—but not quite.

"Oh, is that so?" he yelped with the bitterness of despair, for a thousand columns of lurid print in next day's newspapers leaped to the eyes of a jaundiced imagination. "Well, all I can say now is that you've damn well got what was coming to you. You asked for it. My God! Didn't you ask for it? . . . What? Let him *loose!* Not on your lives. Tie him to a tent-pole till I come back."

Meanwhile, in proper dramatic sequence, comedy was giving place to tragedy again.

Aylmer, having crossed the barrier, guiding his horse by throwing the reins over his left wrist, placed the chaplet on the point of his sword, and, quite unaware of the

identity of any of the men who shrank away from the railing as he advanced, offered the ornament to Lady Betty. With extended arm and the full length of a four-foot sword, he could just reach her. A watchful press photographer secured a snap at that moment, and the picture is a remarkable one, for it shows the Queen, erect and scornful, pointing an accusing hand at the grim figure of the man in armour presenting the chaplet, a pretty, coronet-shaped thing, composed of gold filigree and precious stones. Unknown to the destined recipient, Lord Francis himself had provided it. But the photograph, striking though it be, cannot reproduce the poignant interest of the scene.

"Lady Elisabeth," said Aylmer, looking Lady Betty squarely in the face, "I have the honour to bestow on you, in all humbleness, this mark of your sovereignty as Queen of Beauty."

"I refuse it!" she cried shrilly. "You cannot claim an honour won by dishonour!"

The sword was brought to the upright position known technically as the "carry" with such clang of metal against metal that the G.O.C., York, who was within range, flinched distinctly, to the lasting joy of several observant subalterns among the spectators. The chaplet, aware of no law save that of gravity, fell to the cross-bar of the hilt.

"Dishonour!" said Aylmer, scowling in a way inconceivable by those who knew his true disposition. "A strange word on *your* lips!"

"It was the height of dishonour on your part to break the rules of the Tournay and unhorse Lord Francis," she retorted, careless who heard, and resolved only to bring about the one clear issue:— The rumour which had coupled her name and this madman's must be with-

ered and dispersed for ever. "Your masquerade is an insult. You have spoiled the Pageant, and made fools of us all, merely to gratify your own folly."

"Folly!" he repeated, seeming rather bewildered now. "Perchance that is well said. Though, for once, right and might have marched together, it would appear that I am denied some part of my right. It was not so—in other days—when—by this good sword—I won—a bride—and my lands."

He faltered. A veil might have dropped over his vision, so quickly did the frenzy of the fight fade from his eyes. Indeed, he swayed slightly, and Pamela Sturton, seated next to Lady Betty, uttered a little cry and rose to her feet. But another Maid of Honour flew more speedily to the rescue. Rosalind had already besought a path through the people crowding the nearest passage. It was she who now put both hands on Aylmer's steel-clad shoulders, and murmured broken-heartedly:—

"Cæsar! Dear Cæsar! Won't you put away that dreadful sword, and go home? You have good friends, who will care for you. Please don't distress them any more to-day."

He was rigid enough now, and gazed down wonderingly at the tearful face raised to his. A vague recognition dawned in his eyes, and his stern expression relaxed into a wry smile.

"You here, little one?" he said gently. "'Tis well! You are my only true and faithful lady. Would to God I might claim you as such! That may not be, but pay no heed to this mummery, which meant naught to me save in so far as it touched my fair repute. Now it is ended, and I, your devoted knight, obey your sweet command."

He drew back a pace, evidently meaning to sheathe his

sword, and fearing lest he should injure her. But the chaplet slid down the blade again, whereupon he flicked it off so contemptuously that it fell on the grass a dozen yards away. Then he rattled the sword into its scabbard, and gathered the reins in his left hand.

"Come, good horse!" he cried, and again all who heard noted the foreign pitch of his voice. "You have borne me well to-day when danger threatened. Let us now go to our rest!"

Seizing, with his left hand, a loop provided for the purpose at the base of the animal's neck armour, and grasping the pommel with the right, he vaulted cleanly into the saddle, though the hunter stood seventeen hands high, and the cantle was raised a good six inches above the croup. Nor did he drop into his seat with any force. It was a graceful and perfectly balanced spring, an almost legendary feat as performed by stalwart warriors accustomed to carrying heavy armour, but a quite impossible one for any modern man in possession of his senses, and, in consequence; subject to the disabilities which Aylmer laboured under, for he had eaten not a morsel since an early hour, and he was wholly unused either to the weight of steel or even to being on horseback.

Then, heading for the Castle, he rode along the lists at a walking pace, sitting his charger as to the manner born, being followed, as every eye noted, by a swarthy-faced, slimly-built, straight-backed fellow in the attire of a jongleur.

At the farther end of the barrier progress was blocked by a crowd of knights and men-at-arms, in rear of whom were gathered some hundreds of sightseers trying to snatch fitful glimpses of the Tournay through this nearly impenetrable screen. The pageanteers, of course, saw what had happened, and could not guess why Aylmer

was coming their way. They were soon enlightened. Checking his horse, he said, with a politeness which hardly concealed the imperative command:—

"Messires, I pray you allow me to pass."

They stood, the commoners among them open-mouthed, the men of higher rank undecided how to act, since they were aware that the Senior Earl Marshal had humoured the intruder by allowing him instead of the discomfited wooer to proceed with the crowning of the Queen of Beauty. But they had also heard Lady Betty's refusal of the chaplet, and Aylmer's prompt answer to the affront, so were puzzled how to act for the best, as none could guess his present intent.

Suddenly his vizor was lowered, and his right hand crossed to the hilt of his sword, whereupon the minstrel on foot ran forward, placing himself in front of the horse.

"Gentlemen," he said, "if you are well advised you will carry out the obvious wishes of the Earl Marshal. Clear a way through the crowd for Sir Richard. You will do this easily by retiring some few yards, and pressing the people behind you to right and left."

An irresolute mob always yields to a leader. Aylmer and his companion advanced through the lane of armed men thus provided, and soon were free of interference, because, in sober truth, no one cared to hinder a lunatic who seemed so ready to carve a passage by the sword.

The two went on, following the little-used track across the lush, green meadows which lay between Pageant-ground and Castle. There was no actual road that way, but Calvert had removed certain gates so that hawking parties and the like might have open space wherein to display their braveries. Yet there were men present who remembered that an old path had been closed when Lord Mountford's father gave land for a diversion of the high-

way. Why, then, did Aylmer, who could never have trodden it, take it now?

Calvert, who had recovered his self-possession to some extent, had ordered the band to strike up, and the gallant company assembled for the Tournay retreated in good order, though minus its two chief figures. Already Agricola, in armour of gold, was leading into the arena some Roman soldiers of the 26th Legion as head of the Grand Procession. But there were few eyes for the Emperor and his cohort. Every man and woman who by twisting of necks or by reason of a favourable place could watch the knight and his solitary adherent marching steadily toward the Castle gate seemed unable to take any interest in aught else.

Apparently, the curiously assorted pair exchanged no word. In order to gain the causeway, which ran due west to the gate, they had to incline a little to the right, and climb some broken ground. The last sight, therefore, of the victor and his unknown attendant vouchsafed to the public was the most impressive one, as they were then in profile, high above the meadow-land, and silhouetted against the setting sun. At last, with uncanny suddenness, the two great machicolated towers hid them, whereat tongues were loosened, as it were, and a gabble of eager talk arose, for some thousands of people felt that a spell placed on them had been broken, and that they were able to breathe freely once more.

It was, indeed, literally true that Aylmer and Cellini uttered not a syllable, the one to the other, until further progress was barred by the great oaken doors deeply recessed in the frowning arch. Aylmer had lifted his vizor again—he looked exhausted, and seemed to lack air—and Cellini, watching out of the corner of his eye—saw him

fumbling on the right of the saddle as they reached the causeway.

The slight action conveyed a hint which he acted on when the other looked angrily at the closed doors.

"Friend," he said, "here is no seneschal to answer a horn-blast. Times have changed, and the stronghold of the de Montforts has changed with them. Its walls have fallen. It is but a ruin. Two feeble old people reside in the few chambers still left, and their united strength will not move the gate's rusted bars. If you would enter, you must dismount here."

Aylmer turned dull eyes on the speaker. Apparently, he did not understand, but his expression changed instantly from apathy to distrust, perhaps superstitious fear.

"De Lancy!" he cried in a hollow voice. "Did I not leave thee but a few minutes past stretched senseless in the lists? What doest thou here?"

"I am but the wraith of that dead-and-gone de Lancy," came the calm reply. "And you, Richard Aylmer, will never wed Elisabeth de Montfort. Be pleased to alight, while I ring for the wicket to be opened."

He calculated that by easy stages he might succeed in bringing his stricken companion back to some vague realisation of his surroundings, and thus persuading him to have his armour removed, possibly eat a slight meal, and lie down. There could be no shadow of doubt that Aylmer's brain was dangerously affected now. Cellini had abandoned any hope that the attack was of a temporary nature when he witnessed that vault from the ground to the saddle. No normal man could have done it. It was the leap of an epileptic, whose sinews were strung to the tension of steel wire.

So he maintained a covert surveillance of his friend

while he rang the bell, and his shrewd judgment was justified by the startled look in Aylmer's face.

Sergeant Jackson appeared at the wicket with unexpected celerity. As it happened, he had been watching the Tournay from the Upper Court through field-glasses, and was surprised by the coming of a solitary knight and one attendant, though he naturally imagined it was some incident in the Pageant of which he had not been forewarned. Hence, he had hurried down the Grand Escalier, and was actually awaiting the clamour of the bell, which, by this time, was quite as familiar in Aylmer's ears as in his own.

The knight descended from the saddle far less adroitly than he had last gained it. He would have fallen but for Cellini's strong hand.

"Come!" said the latter, with gentle insistence. "I'll hold your horse, and Mr. Jackson will help you to your room if need be. Don't forget how slippery the stones are under the arch."

He was anxious to get Aylmer inside quickly, because he saw a dog-cart, followed by two cars, speeding down the hill from the town, and assumed that all three were bound for the Castle. He was right. The man in armour had just contrived with uncertain steps to squeeze his bulk through a door not intended for jutting *épaulières* and broad *tassettes*, or steel skirts, not to speak of a cumbrous sword and a shield still fastened to the left fore-arm, when the first car, having passed the dog-cart, drew up, and Sir James Macpherson alighted.

"Providence has certainly sent you at this moment," cried Cellini, with a fervour he would have scoffed at in less arduous hours. "Aylmer is collapsing. Will your chauffeur hold the horse until Calvert sends help? . . . Ah! That is Sergeant Jackson calling . . . Come!"

The two, with Legard and another man on their heels, hurried in. They were somewhat prepared for yet never could have imagined in all its realism the remarkable and quite beautiful picture which met their eyes. Half the courtyard was in shadow, half in sunlight. Aylmer was on his knees, exactly on the dividing line, with his mailed hands held up to the sky as in supplication. Jackson, seemingly at his wits' end to know how to act for the best, was grasping a steel shoulder-piece, and shouting for help. Mrs. Jackson, warned already that something out of the common was taking place, hastened from her kitchen when the bell rang, and now, a white-haired and frail elderly woman, was wringing her hands in dismay because of the affrighting aspect of one whom she had learnt to love almost as a son. Behind this extraordinary group rose the wide-spreading oak and the grey ruin of the banqueting-room. Aylmer's plume, of black and red feathers, offered a vivid contrast to the device on his shield, three leopards couchant gules on a ground of gold. The slanting rays of the sun gilded the curves of his armour, and the gold spurs of knighthood glittered bravely. Cellini said afterwards that he would never forget these spurs. Their spiked rowels shone like conventional stars on a Byzantine canvas set in the dark frame of the cavernous arch.

No one ran—that would have seemed an unwarrantable intrusion—but the four men crept onward with a sort of stealthy haste. Be it remembered they were yet under the spell of that fantastic scene in the tilting-yard. But Sir James was convinced that the catastrophe he feared and almost prophesied had come at last—Aylmer's mind was shattered—henceforth he might be nothing more than the earthly husk of a most gifted and attractive personality. The old surgeon was both grieved and profoundly

sympathetic. Placing a hand on the young artist's shoulder, and looking into the upturned face, he said gently:—

"Ma puir lad—will ye no let us help ye?"

Aylmer had been muttering incoherently, seeing Heaven knows what jumbled imageries of bye-gone events, but, as the grave, kindly question fell on his ears—all the more comprehensible, it may be, because of the quaint Scottish accent and phrase—he seemed to brace himself for a mighty effort to recover his reason. His face, pallid already, and now, for the first time that day, streaming with perspiration, grew perceptibly whiter; his eyes sought the infinite blue with a wistfulness from which had fled the last trace of frenzy, and he said, so clearly that all could hear:—

"This, then, must be death!"

With a heavy sigh, he wilted beneath the friendly grip of Sir James on the one side and Jackson on the other, and pitched forward in such manner that his arms were still fully extended as he lay prone on the smooth carpet of turf.

Macpherson, at first, asked that he should be turned on his back, so that his head might be raised and some brandy or other potent spirit given as a restorative. Then, finding that blood was issuing from nostrils, ears and mouth, though not in any alarming quantity, he as hastily countermanded the instruction.

"No, no!" he cried, with an energy that thrilled Cellini, at any rate, since it seemed to betoken hope. "If a lesion has given way he's better as he is. . . . Can we get this armour off? Do any of you understand these straps and buckles?"

In answer to his appeal there came the very man who knew all about them. Matthew Bolland, incapacitated though he was, knew that something had gone radically

wrong with his under-study during the Tournay, so, when he witnessed Aylmer's dramatic departure from the lists he thought it advisable to drive to the Castle and see after his horse, since no accommodation was available there for the animal. It was his dog-cart which had pelted down the hill, and his groom was able to divest the insensible man of the complicated coat of mail in a few minutes.

By that time the hemorrhage seemed to have ceased, so Aylmer was carried to his own room, from which Mrs. Jackson, specifically authorized by Cellini, had bundled the belongings of the lady members of the quartette.

The occupants of the second car were newspaper reporters, so Cellini, really an admirable controller of men in a crisis like this, took advantage of the fact that they had seen the man who had caused all the commotion lying senseless on the turf.

"That tells the whole story," he said. "Mr. Aylmer, who has given such yeoman service to the Pageant, volunteered to deputise for Mr. Bolland. But the excitement was too much for him, as he has never really recovered from a crash in France. It would be kind if you minimised the incidents of the Tournay, as a sensational moment of that sort tends to undo all the good work of four strenuous days of performance and weeks of preparation."

"But there seemed to be some personal matter at issue," put in one of the journalists.

"Not a bit of it. Lord Francis Grosmont made a point of Aylmer riding in the lists when Mr. Bolland was incapacitated. The people at the Lodge, too, were most friendly. I assure you that no one will regret to-day's crazy developments more than the poor fellow who has just been carried to his room—if he ever knows of them, that is, because he may die. Tell you what, before you

write up this affair, see Calvert, and tell him what I have said. I am sure he will confirm every word of it."

The pressmen did hurry off to interview Calvert, though, of course, they were not at all deceived by what they irreverently termed the "eye-wash" supplied by the minstrel gentleman. However, being decent fellows, they delivered Cellini's message intact, and Calvert, anxious as any other to hush up the affair, not only followed the same line but literally compelled Lord Francis to agree.

Indeed, the latter blundered rather happily. On hearing of Aylmer's serious condition, he said at once:—

"There you have it. Both of us were a bit sprung. The armour, the gees, the lances—the bally actuality of it all—got on our nerves, you see. I jolly well went for him as hard as I knew how, and I shall never be so hipped over anything if it is proved that I hurt him, though, as you boys saw for yourselves, I seemed to get the worst of the scrap by long odds."

So the newspapers of Britain, which, almost unknown to their readers, act as judge and jury in every case brought daily to the assize of public opinion, glossed over the closing scene of the Tournay. But six thousand tongues could not be stilled so effectually. A bitter war of argument was waged in the North Riding on the vital point as to whether or not Lord Francis used his lance fairly, and—as a corollary—did Lady Betty act within her rights in refusing the chaplet from the hands of the man who, by accident, became entitled to present it?

This controversy, however, or any part of it, could not be the subject of judicial enquiry unless Aylmer died. For many hours the tremendous issues of life or death hung on a thread—a thread so fine-drawn that it was difficult to be sure it existed. Cellini, returning from his colloquy with the representatives of the press, found Sir

James with his fingers on Aylmer's pulse. The patient's pallor was so marked that his friend feared the worst.

"Is he dead?" he whispered, when the lifted hand was laid gently on the bed.

"Deid!" snorted Macpherson indignantly. "Not he! Decent-livin' boys of this sort are gey har-r-d te kill. He's a'most at the end o' his tether—a'most, but not quite."

Then, with a disconcerting change of manner, he continued:

"Who are you?"

"I am known as Benvenuto Cellini, leader of a troupe of singers, but I may claim to be better acquainted with Aylmer than anyone else now in Mountford, always excepting your good self," was the suave answer.

"Well, well! If I wanted a disguise I'd choose some other name than that of an Italian scoundrel, no matter how great an artist he may have been. But—who is going to look after this very sick youngster?"

"I'll do my best."

"I'm assuming that. But he needs a doctor and a nurse, and I would like to have a word with both before I leave."

"I understand. If your friend will drive me into Mountford——"

The door of the bedroom, which was ajar, opened, and Rosalind peeped in.

"Please—" she said. "Please—"

Not another word could she utter. One glimpse of Aylmer's death-like face, and she, too, felt like dying. Poor girl, she had hurried from the Pageant ground, and torn off those hateful robes. Now she was wearing the same clothes as on the Wednesday morning, so Sir James recognised her immediately. He put a finger on his lips, beckoned to Cellini, and the three stood behind a closed

door in the tiny sitting-room. Macpherson did not beat about the bush on such occasions.

"Are you a trained nurse?" he enquired, peering at Rosalind with penetrating eyes.

"No," she gulped, clutching at the back of a chair lest she should fall.

"Then your presence here will do more harm than good. Absolute quiet, and the best scientific treatment are the two essentials for Mr. Aylmer just now. Not that we doctors can do much. This is a case for Nature's own healing."

Rosalind bent her head, with that low wail of a woman's grief which, once heard, can never be misinterpreted.

"Take her with you," said Macpherson to Cellini. "Mr. Legard will drive you where you want to go. He's a good fellow, and won't mind being late for dinner. I'll wait here till you return. . . . And, before you go, get that damned bell silenced. It's enough to wake the dead, and may easily kill the living."

The visitors' bell had rung three times in as many minutes. Cellini found several inquirers in the courtyard, among others Professor Hartley-Browne, Major Randolph, and Sir Claude Berkeley. Mannering was there, as well, and the two female members of the troupe. Cellini dealt with the latter first, telling Mannering to arrange for rooms in the town, as there must be many vacant apartments that night. Then he gave the three friends such details of Aylmer's condition as he possessed. In a sense, this was fortunate, since Randolph offered to pilot him to the leading doctor's residence, and assist in the search for a nurse. So the Professor and Sir Claude went off with them, while Mr. Legard escorted Rosalind to her lodgings.

She was so distraught that, at first, he left her alone, thinking, as men do, that tears are women's best solace. But, when the car stopped outside the Barkers' cottage, he plucked up courage to ask if he could assist her.

"I must be in London to-morrow," she explained brokenly, "and my train leaves here at seven o'clock, though I have to wait hours at York. If only I could see Mr. Aylmer before I go!"

"I suppose you will take the 1.15 a. m. from York?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is only eighteen miles. How will it be if my chauffeur calls for you at eleven? He is a careful driver, and will land you safely in York by midnight."

Rosalind looked at him with swimming eyes.

"I have never before realised that there were so many kind people in the world," she said.

"By Gad, there ought to be, if only to make up for an excess of the other sort."

It was a cryptic remark, but it revealed much. Rosalind knew nothing of small town life, yet this shrewd Yorkshire squire was telling her that Mountford was well posted in the secret history of local events during the past few days. In so far as she and certain more notable folk were concerned, their actions, their very thoughts, had evidently provided the tittle-tattle of the market-place.

Old Barker was at home, having his tea. He banged a fist on the table when she entered.

"Why's tha greetin', lass?" he enquired anxiously. "Yon lad's nowt the warse for cloutin' Lord Francis, Ah reckon?"

"Mr. Aylmer is very ill, if that is what you mean," she said, sinking wearily into the comfortable chair Mrs. Barker placed for her with ready solicitude.

"Deng it all! What's gëan wrang? Ah'll tak ma sollum davy Lord Francis didn't mell him."

She guessed at the old man's meaning, and "mell" is not so far removed from "maul."

"He is not injured physically, Mr. Barker—at least—

Oh, I cannot tell. Perhaps the old trouble in his head——"

"Oh, there's lots o' daft föalk gannin' roond i' Mountford te-day. . . . Weel, weel, Ah didn't quite——"

Rosalind felt she wanted to scream. She pushed away the cup of tea Mrs. Barker had given her.

"I'm sorry," she faltered. "I cannot touch anything just now. Perhaps, before I go—" She hurried to her room, leaving Barker to the irate attentions of his granddaughter.

"Dash ma wig!" he protested. "An owd man canna oppen his mooth noo-a-days, it seems. It's as bad here at yam as it was i' t' Pageant-Field. Ah nobbut gev Mr. Aylmer a shoot of encouragement like, an' ivverybody yowped at me as though I'd headed a fox!"

* * * * * * *

That night, shortly before ten o'clock, Rosalind walked down the hill to the Castle, and, with timid hand, pulled the wicket bell. There was no response. She tried a second time, and then realised that, for some reason, the bell had been disconnected, which, of course was Cellini's doing, as both the nurse and the local doctor agreed with Sir James Macpherson that the frequent loud pealing could not fail but be injurious to the sufferer.

Now she did not know what to do. If, after waiting all these tortured hours she were compelled to travel to London throughout the night without any further news of Aylmer's condition the strain would be almost unendurable. In desperation, she knocked on the oaken panel with her knuckles, and, as if by magic, the door opened.

Cellini peered at her out of the darkness. The moon had just risen, and his dark, Mefistofelian face, etched in strong shadows, was thrust forward so suddenly that she started back in alarm.

"I have been looking for you," he said in a sibilant

whisper. "Mannering secured the taxi you didn't require, so I knew that your journey was postponed. Come in!"

She passed into the utter blackness of the arch. The moonlight was just catching the top of the oak and the loftier part of the ruin.

"I can't imagine what I should have done if you hadn't heard," she fluttered.

"Of course, it never occurred to you to press the door, which will remain unlocked all night. How like a woman!"

"Mr. Cellini, how is he?"

"The one man in the world? Slightly better, I believe, but still unconscious."

She realised he had led her into the centre of the courtyard, and not toward the stairs of the main guard. The action was ominous, though the words were reassuring.

"May I not see him?" she said, forcing a calm and direct question.

"No. The doctors have forbidden it absolutely—not to you alone, but to anyone."

"Is he, then, in such real danger?"

Cellini took thought before he answered. When he spoke, it was with an entire absence of the flippant cynicism which marked most of his utterances.

"I'm a friend of yours, Rosalind," he said, "and of Aylmer's, too, I think, in so far as my warped nature will permit friendliness with any human being. And, it is the privilege of a friend to speak plainly. Do you agree?"

"Oh, please do."

"Aylmer will not die. He is physically strong. It seems that the lesion which broke to-day—did you know that something of the kind happened, just after he arrived here?—might have sent clots of blood careering through his brain, in which case he would have died almost instantly. Well, these intruders adopted the better plan of coming out into the open instead of wandering among

certain cerebral sections whose actual relations to the scheme of things no one pretends to understand. Even Sir James Macpherson, though he talks learnedly of temporo-sphenoidal lobes, admits his ignorance of their definite functions, and it was by pressure among them that the trouble began. The bursting of the lesion may be all to the good—mentally, that is. On the other hand, it may not. Sir James, and his Mountford colleague, who is quite a sound family practitioner, agree that the present symptoms are favourable. It seems that a number of miracles happened. First of all, Aylmer has eaten nothing since nine o'clock this morning, and Macpherson believes he will benefit by starving for a week. Then he developed a terrifically high temperature—you saw that jump into the saddle?—something quite supernormal that —which meant delirium. The fever cracked just as he reached the Castle—I mean that his temperature fell from something like 106° to a point low in the nineties, and perspiration poured out of him after being dry as a bone when other men were melting. Thirdly, he lost very little blood—just sufficient to account for the bursting of a lesion, or skin, which had formed in the wrong place and was pressing on his brain. At present, he has yielded to Heaven knows how many grains of bromide—your Edinburgh men never jib at sedatives or anæsthesia—so he ought to sleep the clock around."

"Not one peep?" murmured Rosalind.

"Oh, if you want to get bitten by an alarmingly capable nurse, don't let me stop you?"

She sped across the courtyard to the guard-room. Her steps were noiseless on the turf. Before she reached the massive walls her slight figure was lost in gloom.

"Ghosts!" growled Cellini to himself. "Ghosts! The place is full of 'em. If I remain long I'll see every blackguard ancestor of mine since the Conquest."

CHAPTER XXI

NEW LAMPS FOR OLD

Cellini slept late next morning. He did not know what time he went to bed, as he strolled for hours through the moonlit courts of the Castle after letting Rosalind out. Nor was he alone all that time. Sir Claude, Major Randolph, and Calvert put in an appearance, and so the four adjourned to the Upper Court lest their voices should disturb the man whom they believed to be fighting for his life.

They had talked till long past midnight, Cellini was sure. About what? Every subject under the sun, it would appear. Dwarfing all other mad incidents of a fantastic day was the fact that he and Randolph should have chatted together in amity. He hardly knew how this extraordinary thing came about. He remembered a passing whiff of surprise at seeing Randolph at the wicket-gate. Then, when he had led the visitors up the Grand Escaliar, and thus well away from the sick man's room, some comment by Calvert was taken up by Sir Claude, so Randolph and he drifted into a discussion of sunstroke as creating certain strange mental phases somewhat resembling those displayed by Aylmer.

At any rate, there could be no doubt that Randolph had been more than willing to assume the utter extinction of their personal feud, making that clear, after the manner of his kind, by saying no word about it. Moreover, Claude Berkeley hinted rather emphatically that when the whole world was in a fever the wise man, if he knew aught of philosophy, tried to forget his own sufferings, even his wrongs, since no other human being could be expected to give him any practical sympathy.

Then, there was something else—some reference to the parable of the unused talents in the 25th Chapter of Matthew. What had Berkeley meant by that? Cellini sat up, and ran the fingers of his right hand through his hair. Holding up the stump of his left wrist, he looked at it for an instant, and laughed, softly enough, it is true, but with the rancour of a virile spirit soured by long years of neglect and contumely.

"Lest we forget!" he muttered. "To the devil with all Pharisees, especially the highly-placed ones in the British Civil Service! Though we may cross the seas we change our skies, not our souls!"

Someone knocked.

"Come in!" he cried, expecting Sergeant Jackson to enter.

A young woman whom he had never before set eyes on peeped in at him. She wore a nurse's uniform, and was trim, severe, and distinctly pretty.

"Mr. Cellini?" she enquired.

"Yes, a most surprised Mr. Cellini," he answered.

"I am the day nurse, and I was told to consult you in case any difficulty cropped up. Will you please come to Mr. Aylmer? I cannot understand him at all."

"Nothing unusual in that. What time is it?"

"Nearly eleven o'clock."

Cellini probably intended that she should shut the door, but he never dreamed she might understand French. She did both. The door almost banged.

He followed as quickly as possible, and found Aylmer lying in bed propped up by pillows, and surveying an indignant nurse as though she were a person of painfully inferior intelligence.

"Cheerio, old top!" chortled the invalid. "This young lady says she is a nurse. I admit she looks like one, but

will you tell me, for the love of Mike, why she has hidden my clothes, and insists on remaining here so that I can't get up? I nearly hopped out just now and locked the door on her, but that would have broken a sort of tacit agreement we entered into which recognised you as arbitrator."

Now, Cellini was almost as puzzled by his friend's language and appearance as the nurse who had taken on her duties at eight o'clock that morning. She, of course, had been given explicit details as to her patient's condition and treatment, so his amused wrath at her refusal to clear out at once was by no means in accord with her view of the case. No wonder, therefore, she should have sought help, or that her frank eyes should dwell alternately on the baffling faces of the two men.

Cellini, however, was not one who dawdled when his opinion was sought.

"An arbitrator, am I?" he cackled. "I suppose, then, I am entitled to find out the exact point in dispute. It is largely a matter of trousers, I take it? Why do you, a man recently at the point of death, ask for trousers?"

"If I didn't hate personalities I fear I would mention the word 'Fiddlesticks,'" grinned Aylmer.

Cellini laughed, too. The nurse began to suspect that she had more than one lunatic on her hands.

"Will you kindly tell me the hour and the day of the week?" he said, after a momentary pause.

Aylmer looked at the angle of the sunlight, at the nurse, and at Cellini's dressing-gown costume.

"The hour," he said slowly, "the hour is before noon, but the day—the day——"

"Exactly what is the last thing you remember before going to bed?"

Aylmer's expression changed from bored amusement to one of sheer bewilderment.

"I really don't know," he admitted.

"What? Is the whole of your past life a blank?"

"Don't be an ass! Who could ever forget having met you? But—is to-day Saturday?"

"Yes?"

"Then what in the world have I been doing since I rode into the lists yesterday afternoon, and broke a lance on the shield of that glittering idiot, Lord Francis Grosmont?"

"You've been having a perfectly gorgeous time, my boy. You sprang into the brilliant sunset, and started a quite effective Aurora Borealis all on your own. And you got away with it, too. The bright lexicon of youth has supplied themes for many a score of appearances in Marlborough-street police-court which have not begun to equal in the mass your one magnificent performance. . . . All right, nurse! He's going to be good now, and none of us will talk any more before the doctor comes. If, however, food is allowed, you might ask Mrs. Jackson to make us cups of tea."

"Tea!" shouted Aylmer. "I'm hungry! I could eat scrap iron if nicely fried with onions."

"Tea, and some thin bread and butter," persisted Cellini.

"For Heaven's sake let me have at least one boiled egg!" pleaded the invalid.

"Porridge first—then two poached eggs with bacon," said a deep voice from the doorway. Sir James Macpherson had arrived with the local doctor; in the heat of the argument, none had heard their footsteps crossing the outer room.

"There are times, Sir James, when you display posi-

tively human intelligence," said Aylmer. "Won't you put the seal on your professional reputation by telling my nurse—she *is* my nurse, I suppose?—that I may get up at once, and have a bath while breakfast is being cooked?"

"Certainly!" said Macpherson, drawing a chair to the side of the bed. "Out you come! Never mind the nurse. She won't be shocked."

Aylmer, who had not moved since he woke up, probably made some physical effort to rise, but, beyond a slight wriggle of neck and shoulders, there was no perceptible result. His face, however, showed both alarm and annoyance.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "What has happened to me?"

"How long is it since you rode a horse before yesterday?" enquired the older man.

"Oh, five or six years, at least."

"Why, then, do you think you would be able to go titupping about all the afternoon, carrying a good hundredweight of armour, charging in the lists, and vaulting from the ground to the saddle without touching a stirrup, and yet escape being stiff next day? Ye daft loon, it's meeraculous that ye hav'na sprung every tendon in yer body. But, that's naething. There's a massoor i' the toon, I'm tellt, who'll have ye a' recht by Monday. The really important thing now is yer heid. Have you any pain?"

"None there, Sir James. I have a strangely definite belief that the upper and middle temporo-sphenoidal lobes have agreed to settle their differences, and behave according to the best physiological standards, though you yourself, I seem to remember, had not the highest opinion of them."

Macpherson rose.

"Good-bye!" he said. "Come and see me next time

you're in London. You, too, Mr. Cellini. Come together, and dine, if possible. We can arrange over the phone . . . Nurse, when your patient is able to put on his clothes you can leave him, but that will be Monday morning, at the best. Let him eat and drink what he likes. He's a sensible lad when in his right mind, and I think his wits are normal now—not before time."

When the nurse went to order breakfast Aylmer and Cellini were left alone together for a few minutes. Aylmer found he could, by taking care, turn his head and move his hands.

"Will you lift me up, old bean?" he said.

Cellini got him upright in the bed, and packed pillows and bolster behind him.

"Thanks!" he murmured. "Do you mind answering a few questions? Where is Rosalind?"

"In London, *en route* to Paris."

"Did she come here last night?"

"Yes."

"And see me?"

"I would hate to say a word that might seem to reflect on a most admirable nurse who had been strictly forbidden to allow anyone to see you."

"But I knew. I felt her lips on my forehead. There are no other such lips in all the world."

"Splendid! She will love to hear you say that. It's a convincing line of talk for any woman."

"How did I behave at the Tournament?"

"Oh, perfectly. You acted like a matinée idol."

"Please don't be funny before breakfast."

"I'm trying not to be. That is why the story must keep. You, my lad, are going to eat, sleep, be rubbed—eat, sleep and be rubbed again—before you hear the lurid romance, which, luckily for you, is more entertaining than

tragic. . . . Thank goodness! Here comes Jackson with a preliminary tray. Just imagine it! Breakfast at 11.30! It reminds me of Paris at its best—and worst!"

* * * * * * *

Rosalind and Miss Smithers were lodged comfortably in a small hotel near the Madeleine. They were busy Each day began early and ended late. Miss Smithers knew what to buy and how to economise time. Though, as it happened, Rosalind's glimpse of the higher possibilities of commercial life was of the briefest, it was also most illuminating. The difference between buying and selling can reveal few such yawning gulfs as the price, say, of artificial flowers in some wholesale depot of the Rue Blanche and of the said flowers when stitched on to a hat by a Bond-street milliner.

They accepted no invitations for dinners and theatres. Rosalind pleaded physical weariness, and Miss Smithers supported her shamelessly. The truth was that the Mountford Pageant supplied an unfailing theme for their unoccupied hours, and the older woman's heart renewed its youth in the girl's recital of her four days' adventures. Indeed, it would be difficult to say which of the two was really the more excited when a telegram awaited Rosalind on their return to the hotel on the Tuesday evening. It was from Cellini, who had just received the Paris address:—

"Cæsar's progress remarkable. We probably leave for London to-morrow. Expect more news Thursday."

Disappointing, at first reading, these curt sentences yielded a good deal to patient analysis. They resembled so many lumps of a rich refractory ore, each lump resolving itself, under treatment, into valuable constituents. For all that, Wednesday's waking hours dragged, and Rosalind had to crush the impulse which urged her to seek

some definite tidings by telegraphing Sergeant Jackson or Mrs. Barker. On the Thursday, however, she received two quite explicit messages.

The first read:—

"Arriving Gare du Nord six thirty. Meet me if possible and reserve room your hotel or near. Richard Aylmer."

No fear of that being misunderstood, even by a girl whose eyes danced in her head as they took in the meaning of the typed words.

Then, an hour later, a more cryptic announcement:—

"He wanted to fly, but I persuaded him to get there. Celia and I will drink to the Entente Cordiale at eight o'clock precisely. Hugh Mountstephen Delancy."

"And who on earth may that be?" demanded an astonished Miss Smithers.

Rosalind took thought. Only one man living could have expressed himself thus intimately.

"It must be Mr. Cellini," she said. "He has signed his real name. I wonder why."

"But he speaks of Celia. Don't you dare tell me your one-handed fiddler is going to run off with our Celia!"

"I think he is very fond of her, in his own mad way."

"He has met her only once!"

"Just as long and as often as it took me to go half crazy about Cæsar."

"Dear me!" sighed Miss Smithers. "How that dreadful war has upset everybody! Why, when I was young, such incidents could not possibly happen. . . . At least, they were very rare."

She paled, and her thin lips trembled a little, nor was Rosalind so blinded with happiness that she failed to notice these things. Women do not need words at such

moments. They kissed each other, and soon the faded old maid was telling how chance and a heavy sea in mid-Channel had thrown her into the arms of a young man bound for India, how they travelled together to Paris, how, greatly daring, the young man had hugged her in tender farewell amid all the noise and bustle of the Gare du Nord, and how her first three letters were returned, she having received as many from him, with a sad note from a brother officer telling that his friend had fallen at Tirah three weeks after rejoining his regiment—all this a forgotten tragedy of thirty years ago.

That evening there was another rapturous embrace on the ill-lighted platform of the great north station of Paris, and Rosalind became dimly aware that Aylmer's Norman descent and high-flown vapourings seemed to have combined in making him a most satisfactory lover. He was so delightfully humble about it, too. He had convinced himself that she was a sort of up-to-date goddess who had deigned to show favour to a quite average mortal—"a broken-down crock" he described himself—and he kept on assuring her that, light-headed as he undoubtedly had been before, he was now the victim of a species of permanent delirium in the knowledge that she did really love him.

The three dined together in a cheerful little restaurant, one of those cosy haunts of good cooking and choice wines which can be found even to-day by those who know their Paris in the narrow streets behind the Opera-house. Miss Smithers, by the way, was the pilot.

Of course, they did not forget to honour Cellini's toast. The wine was poured out, but Aylmer asked the two women to wait a few seconds.

"Would you mind taking off your hat?" he said to Rosalind.

No request of his could surprise her. Moreover, there were not a dozen others in the room—all French people, good eaters and careful drinkers.

He reached for a brown paper parcel which he had brought with him, and, marvellous to relate, both Rosalind and Miss Smithers had restrained their curiosity thus far. Under the paper was a coronet-shaped case of blue morocco leather. This, when opened, revealed the famous chaplet of the Queen of Beauty.

"Lady Betty Luttrell hopes you will consent to wear this when the occasion serves," explained Aylmer. "I want you to put it on now for a minute or two, if you don't mind."

Naturally, Rosalind blushed to her shoulders.

"Cæsar, dear!" she murmured. "Wouldn't that be rather absurd?"

"Not a bit. There is no crowd here. I came very near giving it to you before all the nobility and gentry of the North Riding."

Just to please him—what could she refuse him then?—she placed the pretty bauble on her golden-brown hair.

"Tiens!" cried a stout Frenchman, rising and lifting his glass. *"On fait la noce!"*

The phrase had a double meaning. It signified that they were either celebrating a marriage or amusing themselves. At any rate, the whole company joined in congratulating the embarrassed and rosy-cheeked English girl—just one of those human and charmingly spontaneous scenes possible only in France.

When the chaplet was packed away again, and Rosalind was able to speak, she wanted an explanation.

"Simplest thing in the world," said Aylmer. "I had no idea, until Cellini enlightened me, that a lot of onlookers at the Pageant thought Lord Francis tried to take an

unfair advantage by the way he held his lance during the Tournay. That, of course, was pure rot; we agreed to carry our lances as we liked. So I got hold of a newspaper man, and drew up a sort of statement which appeared in Monday's papers. Lord Francis came along that morning, and said it was jolly decent of me, or some such nonsense. He also brought the tiara, which, in the circumstances, Lady Betty couldn't wear, and assured me they both were most anxious that you should accept it as a wedding present. And, why not?"

"Cæsar," she said, "I'm sure Mr. Cellini cast a spell on all of us that day we met on the Wheathampstead Road."

"Oh, that reminds me. He is no longer Benvenuto Cellini. Yesterday he reverted to his proper name of Delancy. It seems that Sir Claude Berkeley has undertaken to clear up some wretched misunderstanding which led to our friend's resignation from the diplomatic service a good many years ago. Indeed, it is probable he will return to the Near East, as he is a wonderful linguist, and gets on well with the Turks. The scheme is that, if Celia will marry him, we and they will go to Constantinople together when we return from our honeymoon, which, by special invitation, will be passed at Lord Mountford's place. The old gentleman says he will be infernally lonely when the younger people go to Scotland. . . . Why, what have I said now? Isn't it a splendid idea? Won't you love to see old Barker again, and his granddaughter, and Sergeant Jackson, and Major Randolph, and Tommy Trenholme, and go mooning off for hours over the moors? Why, my dear one, we'll have the time of our lives!"

And, no doubt, they did.

THE END

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